Family Secrets

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P3/P5 Niijima family AU.

The foundation of the Sanada/Arisato/Niijima household had been rooted in one thing.

Secrecy.

But with the appearance of the Phantom Thieves, that foundation begins to crack.

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Chapter 1

SURPRISE!

Yes, I know, I don't have the actual work here. I didn't feel like uploading my life away just to post this again. And persona fans can be brutal, and I'd rather not deal with unnecessary drama over fan fiction. So, I'm sticking with my Google Docs to give those who have been unable to find this a chance to read it. I usually do my best to let everyone know about updates on Twitter, since they've been extremely sporadic as of late. I just wanted to let everyone know that I'm so sorry for disappearing, and sorry for not really reappearing here, but the story is still there and being worked on!

Check out the contents page here, and if you have any questions, let me know! Again, thank you for understanding and putting up with me!

龍の神様

Chapter 2

Chapter 2

Probably not gonna get too much up today, but here's a start

It was turning out to be a normal day.

The morning was typical. Enjoy the light breakfast Minako had made for him and Makoto. Leave after a kiss (from Minako) and a hug (from Makoto) and a full cup of coffee. Make sure Makoto made it to school safely, from a distance, while catching up on the world news via a newspaper. Get to work, check the computer and/or phone for a message from Sae. Nothing. Spend ten to thirty minutes chatting up his co-workers, finish up his coffee, then dive into paperwork.

The afternoon was slightly different, but Akihiko thought little about it.

"Did you hear that Shujin hired an Olympic gold medalist to teach PE?"

The only reason Akihiko looked up at the chatter was because Shujin had been mentioned. They weren't talking to him; why would they? They didn't know he had a *daughter* in her second year there. It was for the best, he reminded himself, except at times like this. He couldn't gain any information about this man or why Shujin needed him at all without them wondering why he was so curious about it.

"I heard about that. Sounds like that's a pretty big downgrade; an Olympic sports legend to a teacher?" The man who had spoken paused, as if deep in thought, then turned to him right after he managed to look away. "The hype never lasts, does it, Sanada?"

Akihiko leaned back in his seat and crossed his arms, pretending

like he wasn't just eavesdropping on their conversation. “Well, it doesn’t help pay the bills, but, can’t really say that I miss it.”

Honestly, he couldn’t even *breathe* in high school without a thousand girls swarming around him. How Minako was able to not only break through that barrier but then not be intimidated by it, he would never know. Funny, considering that he gained a lot of knowledge on how to *avoid* people to escape the praise back then, something that had only backfired in his face as he got older.

He frowned as he shot a glance to his “life” phone. No message or alert that Sae had contacted him.

He shook off the dread creeping into his heart and tried to steer the conversation off of him and his horrible life decisions. “What did this guy medal in?”

The two veteran cops looked at each other. “I think it was volleyball, right?”

The other nodded. “Heard he had a hell of a spike you didn’t want to be on the receiving end of.”

The two of them continued their conversation as they walked to their respective desks. Akihiko however, tried to recall who had been Shujin’s previous PE teacher and why they would need a replacement. It was required of all students to take the class to graduate, and not that Akihiko was concerned about Makoto *failing* , but he had spent his entire life surrounded by the *bad* and thus, he worried something *bad* had happened.

Perhaps he would ask her at dinner tonight.

Akihiko reminded himself not to get too involved with Makoto’s personal life. All he could hear in his head was Sae screaming at him because he was a hypocrite. He didn’t want people to know about his family lest they use them against him, so how could he justify asking both of them to tell him about their time not spent with him?

He looked back down at his phone, then sighed heavily as he

reached for his half-finished report.

She's never going to forgive me.

And the rest of the afternoon passed much the same as any other. He was the last of his group to leave the office as the night shift settled in after he briefed them on criminal activity. But before he left, he tried to contact Sae, to tell her (again) that he was sorry, that he still loved her, hoped she was happy, and that her mother and her sister would like to see her again. He shoved his phone into his pocket as he walked out of the station to help him focus on his way back home.

The evening, however, was a bit different.

He managed to beat Makoto home, which was strange given how long ago school had let out. But a smile and a kiss from Minako after he stepped inside the apartment calmed him down instantly.

"Chase down any bad guys today, Mr. Detective?"

Akihiko wanted to ask why Makoto wasn't home, but Minako's smile and energy was always so contagious. He found himself chuckling at her as he shed his jacket and draped it over his shoulder. "Pretty quiet today."

Her smile transformed into something more devious, which made his spine straighten ever so slightly. Over 30 years together, and she could still turn him into a pile of nerves with a *look* . "You're going to get fat if all you do is sit at work."

He stared at her for a minute, then felt the color leave his face. "A-Am I *fat* now?"

She, in turn, burst into a fit of giggles and held a hand to her mouth to calm herself. "Oh, honey, it was a *joke* ." She wiped at her eyes before she flashed him another bright smile. "You just came in too depressed for my liking and I don't like spending my evenings dealing with a sour husband."

He exhaled much too loudly, causing her to laugh again, but he at least admitted to himself that he felt much better. He felt a smile

creeping up on his face as he took a step towards her. She met him halfway, looping her arms around his neck as he tossed his jacket over the couch. He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her into him, leaned in, and kissed her.

He only pulled away from her when he heard the click of the doorknob opening behind him. Minako pouted enough to pull a chuckle out of him, but kept her arms around his neck as he turned to the door. Makoto looked up at both of them, then to the clock hanging on the living room wall, before she gently closed the door behind her.

“Um,” she straightened herself against the door as she stared back at them in confusion. “Am I home too late?”

Minako landed a soft peck on his cheek before she released him. “Well, why don’t you tell us why you feel you’re home too late?”

One of the things Akihiko loved (and still does) about Minako was the way she interacted with people. He couldn’t even manage a conversation with *her* without stuttering or looking like a fool when they had first started dating; hell, he *still* couldn’t manage conversations with her sometimes. But she could talk to anyone like she had known them her entire life. Her children were no different. Had *he* been the one to question why Makoto had been at school so late, she would have told him it wasn’t any of his business and run to her room and slam her door and never speak to him again.

Maybe if Minako had addressed the ‘last name’ issue, Sae would still call him *Dad* and they would still have a relationship.

He also needed to realize that Makoto was *not* Sae and to stop being so afraid to talk to her.

Akihiko pulled himself out of his thoughts when Makoto’s confused look changed into a bright smile. “I was elected Student Council President today!”

Both Akihiko and Minako gasped (her’s was too loud and it drowned him out) and Minako threw herself at her daughter. “Oh, honey, that’s wonderful!”

He wanted to say something like, *“That’s a big responsibility,”* but he chose instead, “Congratulations.”

Makoto beamed at him after Minako released her and came to stand behind her, placing her hands on both her daughter’s shoulders. “We should all go out and celebrate!”

Makoto flushed bright red. “M-Mom, it’s not *that* exciting.”

Minako, however, shook her head and kissed the top of Makoto’s head, causing her blush to deepen. “Nonsense. I am so proud of you, Makoto!” She kissed her again until Makoto used her hand to swat her away, to which Akihiko laughed. “Now go change out of your uniform and let’s go out!”

Just before Minako walked out of the room and down the hall, Makoto spoke up. “Is that going to be okay, Dad?”

Akihiko felt the floor give out underneath him. While he personally didn’t think the title of student council president was worth all the bells and whistles Minako was bringing out, it was *his daughter* . He was proud of her. The student body chose *her* because they *respected* her.

However, going out in public as a family had been very much frowned upon. Most celebrations had happened at home per his request. Minako, being her bubbly self, likely didn’t realize the situation she had put him in. Makoto had, he guessed, which was why she felt the need to ask him.

“Go change, Makoto.” Minako’s voice caused both him and Makoto to look over at her. She leaned her hip against the back of the couch, arms crossed over her chest, and a look in her eyes that bordered on the *‘Don’t challenge me’* expression.

Makoto glanced over at him before she walked past him and down the hall to her room. He heard rather than saw Minako approach him, not at all willing to see her reaction to his silence.

“We’re going out, Aki. This is a big deal to Makoto. You can deal with it for one day.”

“She’s student council president, not graduating summa cum laude at the University of Tokyo.”

He almost slapped himself in the face. He bit his tongue and cursed under his breath, but surprisingly, Minako didn’t slap him like he had expected. Her tone, however, was sharp enough to do the necessary damage. “She’s your *daughter* , Akihiko. You should be proud of her.”

“I *am* proud of her,” he replied quickly. “I always will be. But if we were to go out and celebrate every accomplishment from this day on, then everyone will know that she’s *my* daughter.”

“This.” Minako’s eyes narrowed and he braced himself for the anger. “ *This* is what I hate about you. Why are you so afraid that someone is going to go after your children? You just told me today that *nothing happened!* Nothing has happened for *years!”*

He held his hands up in an effort to calm her down. “Everything could have been different had all of you taken on my name.”

When Minako took a deep breath and held it before she released it extremely slowly, he knew the dagger was coming. “Maybe then you would still have a daughter who would speak to you.”

He grabbed her hand before she could walk away. He didn’t know how he was able to summon the heart to speak to her. “I know. I know I messed up. And I know that Sae will never forgive me for being a horrible father. Sometimes I don’t even know why you’re still here, or how Makoto can tell me she still loves me. I know I don’t deserve it.” He dropped her hand and closed his eyes, concentrating on evening out his breaths. He only looked back up at her when the nausea had subsided. “I just…I made this grave. If I come out of it now and tell the world that I have an amazing wife with two amazing daughters, I’m going to lose what I have left.”

Minako placed a hand over his heart and met his eyes. “You’re already losing it, and the only person you can blame is yourself.”

He didn’t go out with Minako or Makoto, much to the latter’s disappointment. He did, however, call up Mitsuru since she wasn’t

too far away and headed out to a quiet and secluded dive bar to meet her. He then proceeded to drink until she slapped him upside the head and effectively numbed him like one of her “executions” had in high school.

“If Minako hated you, she would have left the day Sae walked out of your life.” He tried to reach for his glass, but Mitsuru pinned his wrist to the counter. “I know you’re easily consumed by the past, but if you don’t *let it go* , you’re going to lose Makoto as well.”

She released his wrist, but he didn’t move. He only chuckled. “She’s Shujin’s student council president now.” Mitsuru’s lips slowly stretched into a smile. But his tone quickly lost the pride and turned angry. “And here I am, *talking* about my daughter’s achievement because I’m unable to sit at a damn table with her in case some criminal sees us together and uses her to get to me!”

Her smile disappeared and he felt her hand on his shoulder. “If you feel that bad, you should be there with her instead of being here with me.” She paused, shook her head, then added, “You’re drowning, Akihiko, and I’m running out of methods to save you.”

Despite his wishes, she paid for their tab and drug him out of the bar. “The only way I can help you now is to force you to meet up with them.”

It was late. He doubted Minako and Makoto were even still out, especially on a school night. But through some grace of a god, or Mitsuru’s unlimited abilities to garner information, or his light buzz effecting his logical thinking, she led him right to them. She gave him a light push into the restaurant, but she did not follow after him. To his complete surprise, Minako stood at the counter in front of him, seemingly paying their bill.

Her eyes widened upon seeing him. “A-Aki?”

Makoto came to stand next to Minako, then her eyes widened as well when they landed on him. “D-Dad?”

He didn’t know if it was the alcohol in his system or the pounding regret of the evening, no—his entire *life* , that pulled the words out of

his mouth. “I hear there’s a really nice sweet’s store nearby.”

Makoto broke out into a smile immediately and rushed up to stand in front of him. She didn’t hug him, which hurt more than he thought, but he reached out and placed a hand on her shoulder. “I’m proud of you, Makoto.”

This time, she threw her arms around him and buried her face in his chest. A small, but genuine smile formed on his face as he rested his hand on the back of her head. A part of him was happy to know that Makoto truly loved him, but another part of him was weighed down by guilt again. She was going to be seventeen in a few weeks, and this was their first display of affection outside of their home. He only looked up when Minako stopped directly in front of him.

“Makoto shouldn’t be out this late.” His heart stopped, but there was something warm in the way she spoke, almost as if she was tired but still wanted to do something. Her growing smile, however, is what finally brought the tears to his eyes. “I’ll allow it only for tonight.”

When Makoto had gone to bed once they had come home from the sweet’s shop, Akihiko sat himself down on the couch, his phone gripped tightly in his hand. Heart pounding, he tried to call Sae again, preparing to leave her another “cliché” voicemail. But instead, he told her of Makoto’s accomplishment, the talk he had with Mitsuru, and that the evening he had spent with Makoto had opened his eyes to just how terrible he had been to her. He asked for one chance, a few minutes out of her day to meet with her, to talk face-to-face, then wished her well before he ended the call.

He felt like he had just finished a marathon. But he told himself not to hold his breath. He probably just made things worse for himself...

“Give her some time.”

Akihiko dropped his phone to the floor and looked up at Minako, startled by her voice. “I…I didn’t mean to keep you up.”

He cringed internally as she came to sit beside him. “She has to learn how to forgive you, too.” When he stood up from the couch,

she grabbed his wrist before he could walk off. “I don’t understand what goes through your head sometimes, and it frustrates me. It always has. But I made a promise to you, to help you fight off your demons, and I haven’t been there for you.” She took a deep breath. “I’m sorry.”

He couldn’t help the weak, pathetic laugh that came from his lips. “You have nothing to be sorry about.”

She tugged on his arm several times before he got the message and sat back down. She took the arm still in her grip and tossed it over her shoulder and leaned into him, placing her open palm on his chest. “Makoto actually told me today that what I expect from you is selfish of me.”

He perked up at that, but Minako continued to speak. “I see a lot of you in her. You both want to make everyone happy, keep everyone safe, to be the *best* . You’re both so selfless, so determined, so good at believing in what you do now can pave the way to a brighter future.”

“Minako…”

One playful slap to the chest silenced him. “Sometimes, I get so angry about your train of thought that I overlook how it makes *you* feel.” She lifted her head, but her eyes remained downcast to where her hands now rested on his lap. “You didn’t do what you did to force Sae away, although you might have been a little dramatic about it. But, you’re still her father. You love her. And I honestly think she knows that.” Minako then slowly looked up to him, lifted a hand to his face, and smiled. “When she realizes the sacrifices you have made to protect her, she’ll come back.”

Akihiko was the one to look away first, his guilt pulling at his lungs and suffocating him. He closed his eyes tightly, gripped the fabric of his pants around his knees, and willed his shoulders not to shake. “She’ll never love me again.”

He felt Minako lean against him and her hand on his face forced him to look back at her. “For now, let her do her thing. I promise you that she will come around. If she’s anything like you, or her sister, she’s

already forgiven you. But since she's like me, she's too prideful to admit it."

He wasn't expecting to laugh, but he did, and it felt wonderful. "I hope that she at least agrees to meet with me, even if all she wants to do is yell at me."

"Just promise me you'll wear a bullet proof vest and have back-up, just in case."

He laughed again, promised her that he would take the entire squad with him, then leaned in to kiss her.

He was a little disappointed when she pushed him away gently by his shoulders. "I know I don't tell you enough, or always act like it, but I love you." His heart skipped a beat. "And I always will."

She didn't push him away a second time.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3

"You need to speak to your father."

Sae didn't even blink as she took a sip of the coffee sitting in front of her. As the silence dragged on without her so much as acknowledging her, Minako sighed loudly. "I think he's suffered enough."

"I was under the impression that this is what he wanted."

Sae still didn't look up at her and instead turned her focus to the laptop off to her side. Minako had to clasp her hands together under the café table to keep herself from reaching over and slamming it shut. "You have to understand, Sae, while I don't agree with what he's done, he did it with you and your sister's best interests in mind. All he ever wanted was for you two to be safe."

That got her to finally stop checking the computer screen and face her. It was hard to see Sae like this; so angry and upset (that last part she wouldn't admit to, but Minako knew) over something that had consumed her for years. And while Minako would still to this day beat herself up about not fighting Akihiko's decision with more vigor, Sae needed to get over it.

"You do understand that he made that decision for me, and now I'm making this decision for him, correct?"

It took more willpower than Minako thought necessary to keep from smacking her head into the table. "He loves you. He *still* loves you. Why do you have to be so hard-headed about this?"

Sae gave off a soft, but dark chuckle. "Is this all you came to talk to me about?"

Minako leaned back in her seat. Sae was technically an adult, had been for years now, and could make her own decisions. Whether or

not she agreed with her, they were hers to make. It hurt, being unable to patch up the gap between two people she loved very much, but there was little she could do as mediator anymore.

At least Minako was able to have a relationship with her daughter. It became a sort of ritual to meet at the small café outside of the courthouse in Kasumigaseki once a month just to catch up. Usually, Minako tried not to cross the line that was Akihiko, but after Makoto had come down on her at dinner the other night, she felt she owed both Akihiko and Makoto this little favor. She had tried a few times in the past, but Sae had either stopped talking all together or packed her stuff up and left the second his name was mentioned.

She had yet to tell Akihiko that she had been meeting with Sae regularly for close to two years now. She felt terrible for withholding this information from him, even if a small, conniving part of her told herself it was his fault. Not that she didn't think he would be angry, but she knew it would hurt him. She didn't want to add another wound to his already dying heart.

She wondered if this was the same kind of guilt that was slowly consuming him.

Which was another motivator to get Sae to stop being so cold.

"How's work going, then?"

Sae's face softened at the change in topic. Minako wanted to elaborate and tell her that her father had been pretty bored during the week since there was little criminal activity at the time, but she wisely kept her mouth shut.

"Nothing unusual. Typical drug busts, petty theft, misdemeanor crimes."

Minako watched her hands type away on the computer, a skill set she was slightly jealous of. She was never any good with computers or typing or criminals. Regardless of what Sae would want to believe, she was more like her father than Makoto was.

"I heard Makoto is now student council president."

The comment surprised Minako. One: Sae never stopped typing or gave an indication she was going to speak. Two: the only way she could have known about that would have been if Makoto told her (likely), or if she had actually listened to Akihiko's voicemail from the night he told her. She doubted the latter, but a small part of her hoped that was how she happened upon the information.

"It seems both my daughters are putting all of my achievements to shame."

Sae's lips turned upwards into a smile as she huffed out a laugh. "Just tell her not to burn herself out."

" *You* tell her that." Minako cracked a grin. "She looks up to you, after all. If *I* told her that, she'd roll her eyes and ignore me."

She watched as Sae took the last drink of her coffee before she looked at her watch and nodded. "I'll have to drop by school one day and take her out to celebrate her new title."

Knowing this was goodbye for a few weeks, Minako poked the dying fire. "You could come home and see her, too." She hesitated when Sae froze, but she powered on through. "Even though you have your own place, you're always welcome to come home whenever you want."

The stoic look returned to Sae's features and Minako felt her shoulders drop. "It was good to see you again."

Minako sat for a few more minutes after Sae left, wondering if perhaps Akihiko was right and Sae had been angry for too long and now she would never forgive him.

No. She couldn't give up. Akihiko's desperation to just *see* his daughter was becoming too much for her to bear. She had a few weeks now to plan a different approach. She should have known coming right out and telling her to speak to him wasn't going to work. She just had to hope that something in the very recent future could help tip the scales in her favor.

She couldn't keep playing the middleman. She couldn't keep

watching Akihiko slip farther into his agony. She couldn't keep navigating around Sae's fifty-meter-thick brick walls.

Minako finally found the energy to get out of her seat and pay for her drink. However, the bright and cheery young lady told her that Sae had already taken care of her bill. She smiled, thanked the girl, then walked out of the establishment. She tried to keep the smile on her face, thought about sending a quick text to Sae to thank her for the coffee, but the darkening storm clouds on the horizon stole the last shred of happiness she had at the moment.

Maybe she wasn't half the person Akihiko and her children thought she was.

And just like a sign, before she could make it to the closest station, it started to rain.

Thankfully, she was able to avoid the worst of it. As she walked into Kasumigaseki station, she could see the rain coming down harder and harder as she stood and watched. It was as if the higher beings were trying to curse her usually cheerful mood because she couldn't keep her family from falling apart. She shook her head, turned and walked to her line to get home, and told herself it was only a coincidence.

Minako found a million ways to distract herself during the afternoon. She spoke to both Yukari and Junepi, the former making her feel more upset with herself, but the latter bringing a smile to her face in the end. *"No matter how many times my kids strike out at the plate, I tell 'em to keep their head up so they can do better next time!"* Minako knew that baseball and *life* were two different things with two completely different emotions, but maybe she was thinking too much. Junpei finished the conversation by reminding her that it was the effort, not whether someone hit a home run or swung and missed, that made a great player.

His logic made sense, but the second his chipper voice was out of her head, she began to think that her "life coach" had simply kicked her off the team because she struck out too many times.

She stopped by the market, knowing that Makoto had been

sneaking into her stash of dorayaki again. Plus, she needed more coffee beans, meat and vegetables for dinners, typical things. But while waiting in line to checkout, she saw a small child, maybe three or four, standing on the ground with her arms outstretched and begging for attention from the man in front of her. The man bent down to pick up the child, then the child's smile became too big for her face as she clung to the man's neck.

Minako clutched the basket in her hand, trying and failing to keep images of a younger Sae and a happier Akihiko from flooding her mind. Why did it have to come to this? Why couldn't she fix it? Why was Sae being so damn stubborn about something as trivial as a last name? She reminded herself that she too had been very upset when the idea came out of Akihiko's mouth, but she meant what she told Sae that morning.

He wanted them to be safe. He made a sacrifice to keep his children out of the hands of people who would want to hurt them. If anything, Sae working for the prosecution should have opened her eyes to *why* he would have done such a thing.

She needs more time.

Minako just didn't know how much time Akihiko had left.

Once she was home, she busied herself with meal prep. There was very little to do around the house anymore, the joys of having a daughter and a husband who kept everything tidy. Days like today when her thoughts started to plague her, she turned to cooking. Akihiko was a *terrible* cook, and while Makoto was coming around fairly well, she still liked to stay in charge of the food. She laid out everything she had bought that day, grabbed the cutting boards and knives, and just started chopping.

The noise of the blade slamming into the board was a bit painful on her ears, but she didn't care.

You're going to lose him.

She chopped faster, narrowly missing her fingers a few times, but she didn't care.

You're going to lose him.

She told herself the tears building up in her eyes were from the onions.

"Mom?"

Minako jumped at least five meters and whipped her body around, holding the knife in the air like a weapon. She had to blink a few times to clear her vision well enough to see Makoto peeking her head around the corner of the entrance to the kitchen, eyes wide and hands gripping the corner of the walls in fright.

Once she caught her breath, Minako placed the knife on the cutting board behind her and leaned her back against the counter. "You scared me, Makoto."

Makoto didn't come around the corner, the terrified look still showing on her face. In her silence, Minako turned back to the mass amounts of vegetables she had cut (how long had she been doing that?), wiped the blade of the knife with a nearby dishtowel, then turned back to her daughter.

"I'm assuming school went well?"

Makoto moved into the kitchen slowly, her body relaxing with every step she took. "Yes. We, uh, we got a new teacher today."

Wonderful. A conversation about something *other* than the family she couldn't save. She threw on a smile. "Oh? Is *he* cute?"

Her daughter's shoulders dropped and she gave her the look of, *Really, Mom?* She avoided the question all together. "He was a gold medalist in the Olympics a while back."

"Is that so?" She wiped her hands on the towel from earlier and then crossed her arms. "I'm assuming he's not teaching math, then."

Makoto shook her head with a smile growing on her face. "No. He's teaching PE. He seemed really excited to be a part of the staff. He was pleasant to talk to after school let out today."

“Trying to learn his trade?”

“N-No!” Makoto held up her hands and Minako laughed when she noticed the blush taking over her face. She was so easy to tease, just like her father had been, and still is.

You’re going to lose him.

She was thankful Makoto continued to speak so she didn’t dive back into her despair. “He played volleyball. He spoke to me today because I’m student council president. He wanted to know if we could arrange a volleyball club.”

Minako waited for her to continue, but when her eyes fell to the floor, she pressed her. “…And?”

Makoto simply shrugged. “There’s not much I can do right now. The school year has just started, but it sounds like the students don’t have a need for another club. Plus, the track team has made a name for themselves over the past few months, so most freshmen are interested in joining track.”

“Well,” she started. “Wouldn’t it be cool to have a volleyball club and be taught by someone who actually went to the Olympics and came home with a gold medal?”

Makoto frowned. “You’re just saying this because *you* played volleyball in high school.”

Minako waved her hand dismissively. “And I was horrible at it. My point is, you have someone with the talent, so why not learn a thing or two from him?”

Instead of an answer to her question, Minako got something completely different. “Dad said you were really good.”

To avoid cluing Makoto in on the wound she had just opened up, Minako turned back towards the mess of sliced and diced vegetables. She stared at them for a minute, trying to come up with *something* to tell her before she interpreted her silence the wrong way. She reached up to the cupboards and pulled out several containers, way more than she needed, simply to serve as a

distraction.

It didn't work. "Are you still mad at him?"

Sometimes, she hated the fact that Makoto was intelligent. When she was younger, Minako could just pull some random lie out of a hat and tell her everything was fine and she would smile and go back to her toys or the TV or fighting with her dad. Now, she couldn't miss a beat or Makoto would know something was wrong.

"I'm not mad at him." It was hard enough excusing the secrets she was keeping from Akihiko; she couldn't do the same to her daughter. "I'm actually very worried about him."

The concern was evident in her voice. "Why? Is something wrong?"

Minako tossed a handful of peppers into a container before leaning on the counter with her hands. "He misses your sister."

The second it came out into the open, Minako regretted it. Makoto had the same gung-ho 'I want to fix everything' attitude that she had, yes, but she carried her father's unyielding spirit. Meaning, Makoto was going to confront Sae and then *they* were going to have a strained relationship. Which, if it got bad enough, would cause *her* to have a strained relationship with Sae.

It took a lot of patience and will power to get Sae back in her life in the first place.

She would not lose Makoto. Even for a few days.

She didn't need Sae to be more agitated than she already was.

She couldn't hurt Akihiko any more than she already had.

Minako came to face her again. "Makoto, I know you want to help, but this is something that the two of them have to deal with themselves."

Makoto stared back at her with set and determined eyes for the longest time. "I-I don't like seeing Dad like this."

Minako had to take a deep breath to keep her emotions in check. “I know. I don’t like it either. But you will only hurt both of them if you try and get involved now.”

Makoto’s head fell to her chest as her hands balled up into fists at her side. “Okay.”

Minako took a few steps closer, then reached out to place both hands on Makoto’s shoulders. “The best thing you can do for him is show him you love him. And you know a fantastic way to put him in a better mood?”

Makoto cocked her head to the side. “Tell him I love him?”

“Well, yes,” she said with a laugh. “Ask him to show you how to be a better fighter.”

She stepped out of Minako’s reach with a huff, pride wounded. “I’m already good enough at aikido.”

Minako threw an arm over her shoulder. “If I was ‘really good’ at volleyball Makoto, your dad was an Olympic athlete in the ring. Maybe you should challenge him to a fight, see who the better fighter really is.”

She could see the signs that she had hit Makoto’s curiosity, but it wasn’t until Akihiko actually got home from work that Minako knew she had done well.

“I want to challenge you to a fight, Dad.”

Between Akihiko’s transition of reactions, from surprised, confused, interested, then excited, the word jabs back and forth between the two of them, and their overall energy, Minako knew that everything was going to be okay.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4

“You punch like a girl.”

Makoto’s scowl only deepened. “Well, I *am* a girl!”

Akihiko dodged another one of her half-hearted jabs. “Stop holding back and *fight* me, Makoto.”

She aimed for his shoulder, to which he simply sidestepped, then she swung her legs out to trip him up. She failed in making him lose his footing, but it served enough of a minor distraction that he allowed her the time to draw her arm back for a follow-up strike.

He caught her fist just before she hit him square in the chest. She fought in his grip, prepared to counter with her other hand, but she lost her momentum when he stopped his uppercut right in front of her stomach.

“You’re too slow.”

He released her and Makoto took a step back to catch her breath. They had been sparring together for a few weeks now, ever since her initial request to fight him and how horribly that had gone for her the first time. He hoped that she was taking something away from their bouts, but he knew he was the one who secretly took away the most.

Not only was he doing something he loved, he was spending time with his daughter. He was able to watch her grow stronger, smarter, and quicker every day they trained together, usually twice a week. He could easily see his own fighting spirit in her, and while that thought filled him with immense pride, it also chilled him to the bone.

She was growing up.

Makoto wouldn’t be his little girl for much longer.

Akihiko was getting better at dealing with Sae and her rejection because he still had one daughter to finish bringing up. Not that if he told Makoto that she wouldn't get offended and groan and tell him something like, "I'll be graduating high school next year, Dad. I'm already grown up." But she still loved him, spoke to him, and now was training under him. He wanted to believe that their relationship would continue even after she graduated and pursued her own future.

But dodging her punches and the occasional kick would always remind him of when she was a toddler and would want to fight with him. While her aim had clearly improved over the years, he sure as hell knew the kind of damage he could suffer if he didn't pay attention.

That was why he made their only rule no face shots.

"That's enough for today." He dropped a hand to her shoulder just as she nodded. "You're getting much better."

The smile she gave him warmed his heart. "You think so?"

He ruffled her hair and chuckled when she frowned at him. "You've got a ways to go before you can take me down, though."

Makoto stepped away from him when he didn't stop. "You're getting old. I'll be able to best you soon."

He made her jump when his fist narrowly avoided her face. "Watch it, young lady."

Makoto's surprise turned into something more playful, but she wisely kept her mouth shut. Not that she was all that wonderful with banter, thanks to his genes, but she was also smart enough not to instigate something she couldn't back up with brute force. Even if he was her father.

"Let's get you home before your mother starts to worry I put you in the hospital."

Again, she looked ready to fire off a retort, but she nodded her head and walked to where they had left their things on a nearby table.

She pulled out one of the chairs from under the table and dropped herself into it. Akihiko gave her a total of five seconds before he called out to her.

“Stretch, Makoto,” to which he earned a groan and a scowl. “You know better.”

He didn’t need to look at her to know she had rolled her eyes and/or sneered at him. She always did. But, she always thanked him the next morning when she was able to get out of bed without sore muscles. That was, of course, unless he landed a solid punch to her shoulder because she couldn’t get out of the way quick enough.

However, he noticed on the way out the door that Makoto’s demeanor had shifted more towards depressed than tired. Her eyes bore holes into the ground as they walked towards the station. She wore a serious frown and her shoulders dropped further with every breath. She finally came to a stop beside him, but she continued to keep her face down.

Something pulled at his heart in her silence. “What’s wrong?”

Makoto was a terrible liar, a terrible denier, and terrible at keeping things bottled up. So it didn’t faze him in the slightest when she looked up at him with a pout. “How long did it take you to be good at this?”

He breathed out a laugh, which only irritated her more, before he came to stand in front of her. “You don’t want to know.”

She folded her arms. “You were good in high school, right?” She didn’t even give him time to respond, although she already knew his answer. “So how come I’m not any good? Why can’t I at least *hit* you?”

Akihiko sighed deeply. “Makoto, when I was your age, all I ever did was train. If I wasn’t in class, I was training. If I wasn’t asleep, I was training. I didn’t *do* anything else. Watching you grow up and experience the things you’ve experienced has honestly been new to me as well.” Makoto’s expression softened slightly. “While I don’t really regret the path I chose, I’m glad that you found your own way

to be strong."

He expected some kind of soft thanks or for her to punch him and tell him she wasn't strong enough yet. But instead, she asked, "Is that why Mom fell in love with you?"

He almost fell back on his heels, but he managed to cover it up quickly enough. But, what kind of answer did she want? His mind raced with answers, ranging from "Of course," to "Oh, I didn't know she even liked me until she told me *I* loved *her* ."

However… "Why are you asking?" He eyed her carefully. She wasn't the devious type, the complete opposite really. He actually felt bad for his question, even if Makoto didn't seem to take it as an offense.

Then a bolt of lightning hit him. "Do you have a *boyfriend* ?"

The *second* Makoto's eyes widened, his jaw hit the floor. "N-no!" Her hands shuffled in front of her frantically, a nervous tick. "I-I don't have a boyfriend!"

The pink on her cheeks told him differently. "How long have you been hiding this?"

A part of him was extremely upset with her for not saying anything to him. Sure, he might have looked up the guy at work, made sure he wasn't a criminal or on his way to becoming a criminal, maybe drop by his place for a one-on-one chat, but that didn't mean he wanted Makoto to be afraid to *tell* him.

Most of his worries eased away when she tilted her head and gave him "the look". "Do you really think I would be able to hide a boyfriend from you?"

He didn't want to entertain the thought. "I would hope not."

She pulled at the strap of her bag. "I wouldn't."

He reached for her arm, a slight insecurity coming over him. "Makoto, I don't want you to ever be afraid to tell me anything."

Her smile washed it away. “I’m not.”

“You promise?” he asked before letting her go.

“I promise, Dad.”

Akihiko matched his daughter’s smile as they both continued on their way to the station. It was that time of night where the sun was offering its last few moments of light and giving way to the fluorescent lighting of the buildings around them. He had hated Tokyo when he first got transferred, but Minako (of course) had been extremely excited and it was hard to turn down her happiness. (He also got a hell of a pay raise, the title of *Lieutenant* , his own unit and project, so he also took away a victory.) He just missed the open air, the sunsets over the bay, being able to *stretch out* . He missed the peace he could find in a less crowded part of the country.

But, it was wearing on him, especially Shibuya at night. It was like someone flipped a switch and a unique and powerful energy buzzed on the streets. The people at night were lively, eager to *do* something, and he didn’t quite have that lifestyle as a teenager. Well, not as bright and loud. It was a different kind of excitement for him now, without the fear of charging into a fight and thinking it could be your last. Instead of the lifeless zombie-like people on the streets, there were excited young teenagers who were enjoying *life* .

He’s glad Makoto would never know of his late-night adventures and the city life he had to grow up in.

“Did you need to stop anywhere?”

He turned his head to better *hear* Makoto’s answer. The crowds of people forced her to walk directly beside him, but the noise of the city was keeping him from hearing anything she would say. She shook her head. “I would really like to go to bed.”

He was going to comment on how she needed to build up her endurance or she was never going to stand a chance of beating him, but something made him stop in his place. The *feeling* of someone’s eyes on him turned his blood cold and he zoned out to the world

around him. He told Makoto that he would meet her at home, something in hindsight he should have done when they left the gym. She gave him a questioning look, but she was well aware of his fear of being spotted together, so she nodded and went on without him.

He walked a few paces behind her for a minute or two while scanning the crowds. A few thugs were out and about, but not the kind of trouble he was picking up on. Once Makoto had walked across the street to the station, he took a right and kept close to the buildings. After walking almost a kilometer, he stepped into a shallow gap between a department store and a karaoke establishment and leaned back against the wall to wait.

It took less time than he thought before a young-looking man came to stand in front of him. He didn't look like much: typical partier outfit, hands in his pockets, sunglasses on his head to keep the mess of hair out of his eyes, *way smaller* than he was. He didn't even look more than eighteen years old. Normally, Akihiko wouldn't bat an eye at this kind of person, but the man who came around the corner was another story.

"Akihiko Sanada, huh?"

He only stared back at the man who had spoken to him, the later arrival. He tried to think of what recent criminal activity he had gotten involved in that would have led to someone tailing him. It had been a bizarrely quiet few months, never a good thing in his mind, but nothing really stood out to him. He hadn't been called to a scene, interrogated anyone, or had a working arrest warrant out on someone for over a week.

But that didn't mean he hadn't pissed off the wrong man.

"Can I help you?"

Neither man made a hint as to what their next move would be, but he continued to watch them carefully. The younger man was the first to do something, but he only flashed a grin. It was a little unsettling, not knowing where his cockiness was coming from.

"It's nice to put a name with the face."

While the younger man spoke, it was the other man who caught his attention. In less than a second, he reached into his jacket pocket and pulled a gun, took aim, and fired twice. Akihiko could never say that he *enjoyed* being shot at, but he wasn't as green as the man was taking him for. He had managed to pull himself out of all sorts of confrontations without so much as a single scratch. One poorly planned attempt on his life wasn't going to be enough to bring him down.

The first bullet whipped by the left side of his head.

The second bullet barely missed his right shoulder.

He didn't get off so lucky with the knife.

The reflection off the blade is what ultimately caught his attention. He planned to lunge for the man holding the gun before he fired it again, then saw the white light from the corner of his eye. The younger man, the one he wasn't even worried about, managed to get his weapon right between his shoulder blade and collarbone when he turned to fend off the attack.

The grin never left the man's face. "Kaneshiro sends his regards."

The burning in his shoulder made him grit his teeth in pain. Akihiko knew he would probably need stitches and would be out for a few days, but he didn't think it was fatal. It also wasn't enough to keep him from using the rest of his body to slam the attacker into the wall behind them. The man pulled the blade from his shoulder on impact, prepared to use it again, but Akihiko was much faster. He grabbed the hand with the knife, twisted his arm behind his back, and forced the man's chest against the wall. His arm growing more numb, he turned his head over his uninjured shoulder to find the other man had left the scene, almost as if he had been a ghost or a figment of his imagination.

The squirming punk in his hold pulled his attention back to what was in front of him. The man tried to kick at him, use his head as a bludgeon, but nothing worked. His grip on the man's wrist got tighter until he cried out in pain.

“Let me go!”

Akihiko knew that he was weakened, bleeding, and likely in need of medical attention. However, he sure as hell wasn’t about to let this man go. “Who the hell is Kaneshiro?” he asked, pressing his shoulder deeper into the man’s back. He could tell he was running out of time to question him, his injury taking more of a toll on him than he had originally thought. He also knew it was leaning on the “unethical” side of law, but he felt he deserved to know who had at least sent these men after him.

“Fuck you!”

Well, he tried. He should have considered himself lucky enough that he wasn’t *dead* . No need to try and push his luck at this point.

He told himself as someone came up to him and took the man out of his hold and cuffed him, another person caught him before he fell over, and a third (or maybe one of the other two?) called out for a medic, that maybe he should stop by the lottery machine outside of the station on his way home and pick up a ticket.

Over the course of his life, Akihiko had been hospitalized *several* times. It was probably not something he would freely brag about, but he always enjoyed beating the doctor’s expectations and coming out a little bit tougher than before.

He was probably getting too old to be miraculously bouncing back like he was when he was eighteen.

“Sanada?”

He didn’t even remember how he got to the hospital. Hell, he didn’t even know what had happened before he passed out. Did he pass out? He remembered a lot of voices, people talking about a stabbing, an arrest, and an injured off-duty police officer. He thought it had been his imagination, maybe a dream, but the bright lights above him and the searing pain in his shoulder reminded him it was all very *real* .

“Can you hear me?”

Akihiko somehow managed to overcome the brightness barrier and force his eyes open, turning his head slightly towards the voice. He was grateful they chose to sit on his right side to avoid adding any more discomfort to his shoulder. The bandages were tight enough that when he turned, he felt them tear against his skin. It hurt like a bitch.

But then he blinked a few times and the world came into focus. His pain briefly forgotten about, he stared slack-jawed at the person beside him.

“S-Sae?!”

Sae’s face remained expressionless, but she leaned back into her chair. Akihiko couldn’t tell if he was having a hard time breathing due to his injury or if the air in the room became too heavy and it was crushing him. At the moment, he was grateful to see Sae again after almost eight years while he was hospitalized. He could use the medication and his instability as an excuse to play down how *happy* he was to finally see her again, in case she snapped at him.

“I’ve been assigned to your case. I wanted to come talk to you personally to get the final details together for court.”

Her tone had been sharp and very businesslike, but one thing stood out to him. She said she *wanted* to come talk to him. She could have denied her bosses and handed it off to another person, but she didn’t.

He could feel years of rejection and longing to see her rise to the surface. But he didn’t look away from her. He knew every second was worth it.

“I’ve missed you.”

Sae only stared back at him, eyes narrowing ever so slightly after each passing second. Akihiko eventually turned to look back up at the ceiling, the smile never dropping from his lips.

“You don’t know how much this means to me.”

He heard the scraping of the chair as Sae stood up quickly. “I have a very busy day and I would appreciate it if you could spare me the formalities and tell me what happened.”

She was angry, he could tell that from her voice alone. But, it meant she was still hurting, still feeling something about him, and Minako’s words came to the forefront of his mind.

She needed more time.

He decided it was wise not to anger her any further. He didn’t want this meeting to go so horribly wrong that it cost him another chance to see her. “Someone named Kaneshiro wants me dead I hear. The man who managed to stab me told me as much. The second man was only there as a distraction if I had to guess. He knew who I was, took a few shots at me, but he didn’t stick around to finish me off.”

Akihiko knew he probably could have if he would have stayed.

He shook off the thought. “I’m assuming the attacker is in custody?”

“He is,” she replied, one hand coming to rest on her hip. For a split second, he saw her mother. “What about the other man? The one who got away?”

Akihiko relaxed into the mattress, as stiff as the damn thing was. “I don’t know. I’ve never seen him before. He looked like your typical mafia muscle man: black sports jacket, dark glasses, dark hair, nothing I could really give you as an identifiable feature.”

She sighed as she brought her hand to her chin. “Who’s Kaneshiro and why would he want you dead?”

“I’ll be sure to figure that out, so you just focus on putting your guy in jail.”

The silence that followed his remark was suffocating. He tried to focus on his shoulder, the sharp burn he felt when he tried to move it, but nothing could stop him from glancing over at the daughter he never thought he’d see again.

“I know you don’t want to hear this, but I’m proud of the person

you've become."

Her arm fell to her side and she shook her head. "Is there anything else about the *attack* you need to tell me?"

She needed more time.

He tried to keep a smile off his face. "I can call you and let you know if anything else comes up."

Without batting an eye, Sae pulled out a business card from her bag and set it on the table next to him. "Don't make me regret this."

He was relieved that he couldn't move the left side of his body or he would have sat up and wrapped his arms around her and promised her he would be a better father. He had to settle with a small smile and a nod.

"I won't."

Once Sae had left, he reached (blindly, thanks to his limited mobility) for the card sitting by his side. He couldn't even read the damn thing before it fell from his shaking fingers and he covered his eyes with his hand.

It wasn't the meeting he had hoped for, but it was still everything he wanted.

With a small weight of guilt lifted off his chest and the aid of the medication in the IV, he was able to fall into a light sleep. However, he was always aware of his surroundings; a nurse would come check in on him every hour; another dropped off a meal he wouldn't think about touching; a few of his co-workers told him he could only have one day off and then he was expected to come back to work.

Then there was silence. He didn't hate it, but he also hated not doing anything. His body screamed at him to stop fighting sleep, but his mind wouldn't shut off. At one point, he gave up and thought about going for a walk. But when he managed to sit up in the bed, he heard someone at the door.

He groaned under his breath. "I can't stay cooped up in this room

when I have things to-,"

Except he wasn't talking to a nurse or a doctor. Minako stood just inside the doorframe, a light stream of tears on her face and a murderous look in her eyes.

He didn't have time to stumble over an apology before she crossed the room and slapped him across the face. He grabbed the wrist still hanging in the air and pulled on her until she fell on top of him, thankfully avoiding his wound.

"I hate you. I hate you so much." He let her cry and vent her frustrations without saying a word. He knew she didn't mean what she was saying, having been through this at least once in the past. So he just held her and waited for her to calm down.

"They said you were stabbed," she said after a moment of silence, her sobs still wracking her frame. "I thought you were dead."

He ran his hand through her hair and softly kissed the crown of her head. "Sae came to see me."

Minako stiffened under his arm and clutched the fabric of his hospital gown with her hand. She looked up at him with wide eyes and tears still clinging to her lashes.

"W-What?"

He made an attempt to sit back up and he welcomed her help. The dread he felt over Minako finding out the hard way (likely Mitsuru) that he had been hospitalized turned into something warmer in his chest.

"I got to talk to her."

Minako still gave him a blank stare, but eventually she sat back on the bed. "You did?"

He smiled like he was a child receiving a present he had wanted his entire life. "Not quite the conversation I wanted to have, but it still made me happy."

Minako’s lips slowly worked into a warm smile. “I hope you don’t plan on getting stabbed just to see her again.”

His hand found the business card that had fallen to his side. He held it up and took a deep breath to steady himself. “I hope not, too.”

Chapter 5

Chapter 5

“Dude, gettin’ stabbed by gangsters is so freakin’ bad ass!”

Akihiko winced at Ryuji's shout, a move that irritated the shoulder propped up by a sling. He was still recovering, so every little bit of pain was amplified, and the kid was literally sitting next to him at the counter *yelling* in his ear. He was fond of the teen, but, not when he got *loud* .

“Dial it back.” The dark-haired boy only grinned madly before turning back to the beef bowl in front of him.

“So, did you like, fight the mafia and shit?”

He had met Ryuji in passing, breaking up a small-time squabble on his way home almost a year ago. Akihiko definitely had a hell of a time subduing him, but he was eventually able to talk to him and calm him down. He had walked him to the station and Ryuji had slouched and kicked at the ground in a manner that reminded him of Shinji. As they walked past the beef bowl shop in Shibuya (not nearly as good as the one back in Iwatodai, but he would make due), the boy’s eyes lit up while he went on to exclaim how awesome the shop was and how much better beef bowl tasted right before a big track meet.

Akihiko didn’t like to make friends with people younger than his daughters, *especially* Makoto, but he made an exception with Ryuji.

He had asked if he wanted to go inside and eat and the teen opened up to him almost instantly after they were seated. Ryuji told him of his deadbeat father, an alcoholic who beat him and his mother until he finally up and left. But he overcame most of his anger by running and then joining the track team. His merits as an athlete was how he found himself at Shujin, which was a small reward for Akihiko. Instead of prying Makoto for information about how school was going, he could ask Ryuji, who had just started his first year.

Most of his good qualities outweighed the times Akihiko wanted to strangle him. Like when Ryuji was too boisterous about his career, when he found out the teen had been late to school more often than on time, when he liked to snap over the most trivial things. But, he had a good heart.

Akihiko also had this extremely bizarre feeling about him when they first met, almost like he had known him…or something. It drove him nuts not being able to place it. He tried to name it once, something akin to that electrifying feel he used to get when he was amongst the other persona users. He laughed at the ridiculousness of the thought and over the year, he eventually got used to it.

Maybe he was the spirit of Shinji, but with a more violent personality.

Akihiko quickly changed the subject to something less exciting to keep the boy quiet. “Have you been going to school?”

He watched Ryuji’s face fall instantly, turning to glare at his meal. “Yeah.”

While Akihiko didn’t want to pry, he felt bad killing his energetic spirit. “Something wrong?”

Ryuji was very much like Makoto; unable to let problems stew beneath the surface. Akihiko did jump slightly when both of his fists slammed onto the counter.

“Effin’ bastard’s gonna break up the team!”

Akihiko placed his chopsticks over his bowl and sighed. “Keep it down.”

Ryuji’s eyes cut right into his soul. “Look, I ain’t good at a lot, but I swear if that bastard breaks us up, I’m gonna raise hell.” He slammed his fists again. “I’ll come at him and make him regret it!”

Akihiko’s first thought was that he had just threatened someone, and as a cop, he could have reprimanded him. However, the snarl on the boy’s face made him lax on the punishment and so he sought to figure out what the hell he was talking about.

“Someone wants to disband the track team?”

Ryuji threw his back against his chair, exhaling deeply and draining the room of life. He dropped his head to his chest, but his hands were still curled up by his sides. “This new teacher comes in thinkin’ he’s oh so cool and shit. Already kicked out our coach! Now he’s after us!” Ryuji looked over at him, rage still burning in his eyes. “All because he can’t get his damn volleyball club.”

Realization dawned on Akihiko after a moment. “Wait. The Olympic all-star?”

“Yeah, man!” Ryuji’s eyes grew wide. “He got some record or somethin’?! Can you arrest him?!”

Akihiko sighed again and made a move for his chopsticks. “Sakamoto, all I know is that he got a gold medal in volleyball. And I think you’re being a bit paranoid.” Ryuji glared at him. “How do you know he kicked out your coach instead of him just leaving on his own?”

One of the boy’s fists pounded against the tabletop while Akihiko tossed a helping of rice into his mouth. “He’s an asshole, that’s how I know!” He continued to chip away at his meal until Ryuji slammed his fist again. “He’s tryin’ to kill us, man! No matter how hard we run, or for how long, it’s never enough! The team is losin’ heart, even though we’re all sufferin’ together! We can’t keep this up!”

His meal finished, Akihiko took a breath and turned his body in his seat. “Being an asshole isn’t a crime. Just because you don’t like him doesn’t mean that he’s a bad guy. Have you ever thought that maybe he wants to push you guys because he believes in you?”

Having been in a club himself in high school, Akihiko grew irritable at times with his coach. He pushed him, but he was grateful for it. Without raising the bar every time he was able to reach it, he wouldn’t have gotten anywhere in life. Ryuji may not like it now, but in the end, he would appreciate it.

“He’s an effin’ asshole who only cares about himself and what *he* wants! He doesn’t give a rat’s ass ‘bout us!”

He was arguing without knowing all the facts, so he decided to call it a night. “I’ll look into him if I can, but I don’t make any guarantees.” Akihiko stood, reached for his wallet, and placed a few yen bills on the counter in front of their now empty bowls. “Just promise me you’ll stay out of trouble.”

Ryuji huffed and leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. “If he comes after one of us, you bet your ass I’m gonna wreck him.”

Akihiko groaned as he grabbed his work blazer from the back of the chair. “Then I guess the next time we meet will be at the station.”

A few weeks later, things took a turn.

He was at work, trying to find more information on a “Kaneshiro”, but he couldn’t find anything. A few of his co-workers had told him that he was likely some mafia king who was tired of Akihiko stepping on his turf. A rumor on the street had led him to believe that they had crossed paths when he had broken up several small prostitution rings in Kabukicho over the course of two years. Thanks to the help of some of his peers, activity in the red-light district had nearly ceased to exist, so it wouldn’t surprise him at all if the top of the food chain had beef with him.

But without a full name or a face, he had no idea how to validate anything he had heard.

Right after the lunch break, the phone on his desk roared to life. It wasn’t unusual, but what worried him was who was on the other end.

“A Ryuji Sakamoto was admitted into the ER today and he’s requesting your presence.”

The phone landed in the receiver with a loud *thud* . Akihiko fell into his chair and ran a hand through his hair. Ryuji was at least conscious if he was asking for him, but how the hell did he land himself in the hospital? He hoped it wasn’t anything serious, maybe a broken fist or a few minor cuts.

However, all that kept running through his mind on route to see him was, *"What did you do?!"*

The nurse was kind enough to escort him once he flashed his ID and badge. He was first met by Ryuji's mother outside one of the rooms. Akihiko's heart fell into his stomach as he noticed she had been crying. He also realized he was not on the ground floor ER, which made him worry about the severity of his injuries. Ryuji's mother didn't offer him much other than a warm, "I'm glad he has a good friend," before he helped her sit back down.

Akihiko braced himself before he stepped into the room. The first thing he saw was his leg, covered with plaster from foot to thigh, hanging in the air by a make-shift canopy. Ryuji himself had his arms crossed over his chest, head turned towards the window, and glared at the sun's rays as if they were mortal enemies. Akihiko swallowed hard before coming to stand by the bed.

He didn't know what to say. He knew what this meant for Ryuji: a man with a broken leg couldn't run, and despite only knowing the kid for a year, he knew where his passion was. And it made it that much harder to speak to him knowing that it had been ripped away from him.

"He broke my leg."

Akihiko was slightly startled by Ryuji's voice, even as quiet as it was. However, he felt he needed to help the boy, so he grabbed a nearby chair and slowly sat down. "Tell me what happened."

The rage was instantaneous. "He broke my fuckin' leg! I can't run anymore! That piece of shit took *everything* from me!"

He was willing to let Ryuji scream and curse and punch and kick to his heart's content, but he worried he would damage his leg even more than it already was. He didn't know the extent of the break, or where it really was, but he had broken enough bones in his lifetime and he knew that it could heal. It was important for Ryuji to do everything he could now to keep the damage minimal.

In an effort to calm him down, Akihiko placed himself on the bed and

forced his shoulders back into the mattress. Ryuji fought him for a few seconds, but then he coughed out a weak, “I’m gonna kill him,” before he shook his head to hide the tears in his eyes.

He wanted to give Ryuji his space, but he also knew he was dealing with an assault case. He needed the story *now* if he wanted to help. “Sakamoto, in order for me to help you, I need you to tell me what happened. If you need time to calm yourself, take it now. If it makes you feel more comfortable, I can step out and get your mother if you’d like her in here when you’re ready to talk.”

Ryuji shook his head harder. “No. I don’t want her to worry any more than I’ve made her.”

He stood from the bed and took his seat back in the chair. He pulled the small notebook from the front pocket of his jacket. “If you want her to be in here at any time, you just have to tell me.”

The teen nodded and used the back of his hand to wipe the tears from his face, but then he turned and looked at the opposite wall. “Kamoshida.”

Akihiko thought he heard a name, but Ryuji’s voice had been strained and quiet. He needed to *hear* it for his report. “I can’t hear you.”

Ryuji closed his eyes and grimaced as if he was in pain. “Kamoshida! Kamoshida was the bastard who did this to me!” The boy shuffled on the bed until he was facing him. “Started sayin’ shit ‘bout my dad and I got pissed.”

Akihiko paused in his writing. “How pissed?” He stared back at Ryuji and waited. He knew the boy was easily provoked. While that wasn’t an excuse to break the kid’s leg, if this went to court, a good defense attorney could easily claim self-defense.

In Ryuji’s silence, however, Akihiko grew restless. “Did you attack him first?”

The boy glared at him. “I didn’t break his damn leg!”

Akihiko tossed his head back until it hit the back of the chair.

“Sakamoto, I need to know exactly what you did, even if it could get you in trouble.”

“ *Me?!”* If Ryuji could have stood and lunged at him, he would have. “That bastard destroyed the team! He took away my future! I didn’t even hit him!”

“You’re not answering my question.”

“How the hell can you tell me this is *my* fault?!”

Deafening silence filled the room for what felt like hours. Akihiko closed his notepad and placed it back in his pocket before he propped his elbows on his knees and leaned into his hands. “I’m not blaming you. Even if you attacked him first, which I’m not saying you did, he had no right to hurt you the way he did. At the very least, this is grounds for disciplinary action by the board.” He sighed before continuing. “And while I’m on your side in this, you have to understand that my opinion of you does very little in the eyes of the law.”

Ryuji rolled his shoulders and tried to sit up, but stopped when he realized he couldn’t move his leg. “So, you ain’t gonna arrest him?”

Akihiko stood from his seat. “I’ll fill out the paperwork for his arrest once I talk to him.”

“Why?” came Ryuji’s response. “You think I’m lying or something?”

He shook his head. “I know you’re not. But it’s my job to hear both sides of the story so people know I didn’t base my report on personal bias.”

He was suddenly at a loss of how to wish the boy well, knowing that he was likely out for at least the rest of the year, assuming he had a team to go back to at all. “Broken bones will heal over time and with proper rest.” He looked down at Ryuji and offered a warm smile. “You’ll bounce back. I know you will.”

Before he could make it out the door, Ryuji called out to him. “He ain’t gonna stop with just me. He gets that volleyball club, ain’t no one safe.”

His thoughts briefly shifted to Makoto, but he shook his head before they could solidify. “I’ll do whatever I can to see to it that he doesn’t.”

He heard Ryuji mutter, “Thanks, Sanada,” as he walked out of the room.

It was time to meet this Olympic gold medalist for himself.

He made an appointment with the principal for the next day. The man had been flabbergasted that a lieutenant of the police force wanted to speak to a teacher that had been such a great asset to the school, but Akihiko assured him it was “just to talk”. Whether or not it calmed the other man down, he didn’t care. He was willing to bet that he had caught wind of the attack and already chose a side and wanted to sweep this under the rug before the media heard about it. Akihiko doubted the principal thought Ryuji would have a “cop friend”.

He had been so upset and angry when he made the call that he completely forgot that there was a chance he would run into his *daughter* .

Makoto had been too shocked to see him that she didn’t think about what she said. “D-Dad? W-What are you doing here?”

He was thankful there weren’t a lot of students around an hour after school had let out and that she had kept her voice down. Still, it could have been disastrous, and his fault for not thinking this through, but he gave her a stern look regardless.

She muttered a quiet, “sorry” as she walked past him and down the hall. He almost stopped her and asked her if this Kamoshida teacher was a good or bad guy in her opinion, but he didn’t. The less Makoto knew about the people he was trying to protect her from, the better.

When he arrived at the principal’s office, he was greeted by two men: a large man in a mustard-yellow suit that was much too small for him sitting behind the desk, then the man standing beside him that Akihiko presumed to be Kamoshida.

“Kamoshida-san, this is Lieutenant Akihiko Sanada with the Tokyo

Metropolitan Police."

While he didn't need his full title revealed to a man under question, it did make Kamoshida stop *glaring* at him. "That's terrific." He couldn't tell if this tone was sarcastic or cocky. "I'm assuming you would like the full *true* story about what happened to Ryuji Sakamoto."

"That's exactly why I'm here." Akihiko honestly didn't know what to make of this man. He was slightly taller than he was and very fit, thanks to the small, thin white shirt he was wearing. But he had an air of arrogance about him that made him very uneasy. His intuition had never steered him wrong before. Only criminals or people with something to hide glared at people they had never met.

"So, if you don't mind," Akihiko added, retrieving his notebook and flipping to a fresh page as he took the seat across from where Kamoshida had sat. "I'd like to ask you a few questions. Keep in mind that you are under no obligation to answer any of them, and you can end this interview whenever you would-,"

"Let me make one thing clear, Sanada-san." Kamoshida held up a hand and wore a painful expression, but his aura was confident and egotistical. He *did* just interrupt a police officer. "You can ask me any question you like so we can lay this story to rest."

If Akihiko had been a rookie, he might have taken the man as sincere. But that feeling in the pit of his stomach only told him that this man was a professional *liar* and had never had someone challenge his word.

"I was wondering if you could tell me your version of the story."

Ryuji had admitted to falling victim to the man's words and he had retaliated in anger. He didn't see any reason why Kamoshida would deny it, but he didn't want to put words in his mouth.

Kamoshida sighed, likely to come across as the innocent, but sorrowful instigator. "Those boys are a great group of kids. Sakamoto is just extremely volatile. I will admit that I use some under-handed tactics to push them, but I didn't think one general stab at his father would make him react the way he did."

“So you admit that you gave him a reason to be hostile.”

To his surprise, Kamoshida nodded. “Yes. And I truly regret it. He was tired, but I knew he could keep going. But instead, he turned that rage into an attack and I had to act out to prevent him from hurting someone.”

“You saw him as a threat to the other team members?” he asked without looking up from his notes. He knew Ryuji decently enough to know that he wouldn’t attack someone without provocation, and if he did, he would only attack *who* set him off. If Kamoshida used the team’s safety as an excuse to bring harm to the boy, Akihiko wouldn’t buy it.

Kamoshida leaned into his seatback. “I’m sure you’re familiar with subduing techniques, but I’m a teacher who played volleyball. I tried to get him into a headlock, but he continued to fight me. He hit me in the chest with the back of his head hard enough that I lost my balance. The next thing I know, we’re both on the ground and he’s screaming and grabbing his leg.” He covered his face with his hands. “Christ, I feel terrible.”

That got Akihiko to stop writing and lift his eyes to the man sitting in front of him. “With all due respect, Kamoshida-san, Sakamoto is half your size. You’re telling me that a man in your physical condition couldn’t restrain a scrawny teenage boy?”

If he took offense to his comment, he didn’t show it. “I didn’t want to hurt him. I know that those kinds of techniques, if not done correctly, can do more harm to the person. It was a moment of weakness, one that will haunt me for the rest of my life.”

Akihiko returned his attention to the paper in his hands. “Have you ever coached track before?”

He managed to catch a small flash of anger in Kamoshida’s eyes. “No. I have not.”

“Have you ever coached *any* sport before?”

Another growl from the man in front of him. “No.”

The principal, growing uncomfortable, spoke up. “He’s an Olympic sports legend, Sanada-san.” The man pulled at his collar and Akihiko thought he was choking. “There’s no greater honor than to have one of our own alumni return to teach a sport he excelled at.”

Akihiko smirked as he jotted down his comment. “So you hired him to take over the track team? So he could break them up and get his volleyball club?”

Kamoshida came to his feet instantly. “Are you trying to say something?”

He remained seated. “I’m just confused, since there isn’t a volleyball club, you have no experience coaching track, but here you are.”

The tension in the room built up into a deafening silence. He was pretty sure that had he not been addressed as a cop by the principal, Kamoshida would have decked him. “And how much experience do you have with teenagers who hate you and won’t give you a chance?”

The question struck him square in the chest. It was powerful enough that he stopped writing and had to take a moment to breathe. To cover up his hesitation, he asked a different question. “Are you aware of the severity of his injuries?”

Kamoshida either didn’t notice or thought little of it. “I was told he had a broken leg. That’s all I know.”

Akihiko flipped his notepad closed and stood from his seat. “The doctor says he’ll be able to start running again in a few months.” It was a lie, but he got the reaction he wanted: a darkening scowl, rage-filled eyes, fists tightening at his side. He tried to contain the pleasure he got watching the man reign in his anger. “I’m sure that will be wonderful news for the track team, and for you. Sakamoto might not press charges now.”

If looks could kill, Kamoshida may have made an attempt on his life. “I’ll be sure to tell them the good news.” He took two steps until he was literally chest-to-chest with him. It was odd having to look up at someone, but Kamoshida had another thing coming if he thought he

was intimidated. “I hope I’ve answered all of your questions, *Detective.* ”

Akihiko couldn’t help the grin that pulled at his lips. He snickered as he straightened his tie. “It’s *Lieutenant* , but yes. I’ll be sure to speak to you again if a follow-up is required. I greatly appreciate your time.”

He could *feel* his eyes trying to murder him as he walked out of the office and closed the door behind him. While he didn’t learn anything that he hadn’t already pieced together from his talk with Ryuji, he at least had enough to write up a report and submit it for an official interrogation. If anything, self-defense or not, the school board would take an interest in a teacher who broke a student’s leg. Kamoshida may avoid jail time, but he could easily lose his job.

For the first time in a long while, *he* was the one with the energy when he came home. When Minako asked him about where his cheerfulness was coming from, he only smiled, kissed her, and told her it was nice doing good things for people without a voice.

His original plan had been to give Kamoshida some time to grow uncomfortable, to see if he would make a move that could lead to his arrest rather than an interrogation…

But when he woke up in a cold sweat after a horrifying nightmare where Makoto was the one in the hospital bed with more than a *broken leg* , he didn’t want to take any chances. Despite Minako’s quiet and groggy questions asking what was wrong and where he was going, he went into work, typed up his report, and dropped it on his superior’s desk.

He would *not* let Kamoshida hurt his daughter.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6

Makoto was beginning to worry that she wasn't cut out for student council president.

No one on the council really seemed to want to *do* anything. That left her staying late after school to finish getting signatures from teachers for budget plans, organize and file complaints and concerns, make sure that the freshmen were feeling comfortable in a new school. She knew it was a big responsibility to shoulder, but she didn't really think she would be doing a majority of the work *alone.*

She didn't want to go home and complain to her parents about the title that they had been so *proud* of her for achieving. They both had enough on their plate without her throwing on her insecurities. Plus, her dad was very overprotective, so any slight disturbance at school would make him send out an undercover cop just to make sure she was okay.

She would have felt better going directly to Sis, but…she had been pretty busy herself with *real* problems that centered around bad guys and not annoyed high school students who wanted everything to go their way.

School had been in session for almost three months now. Everyone had long settled into a routine and Makoto could easily tell who was going to pass their exams and who would be causing trouble. (She didn't name any names because she was a good student and she knew better.) School life was pretty much the same from day to day for the first month, most of the second, but then things began to change.

She didn't think anything of it initially when members of the track team started to grow hostile for no apparent reason. She knew some of the members were upset, especially a freshman, Ryuji Sakamoto, when their coach had left and Kamoshida had taken over. But as

Sakamoto had a reputation for delinquent behavior, she thought little of it.

She did, however, feel very uncomfortable around Kamoshida. He had spoken to her several times about a volleyball club, and she always told him the same thing. *"It's ultimately out of my hands. Until there's a vacancy in the budget for a new club, the principal will not allow it."* He always gave her a look that unnerved her, tried to butter her up and sweet talk her into changing her mind, but it never worked.

She thought his behavior was odd for a teacher, but she didn't know if he was just strange or had a passion for volleyball that she couldn't understand.

At the very beginning of July, a female student approached her in the student council room after school. She introduced herself as Ann Takamaki, a freshman, then proceeded to tell her that she too felt uncomfortable around Kamoshida.

"The way he looks at me and some of the other girls, it's kinda creepy."

She had agreed with her, but Makoto didn't think there was much she could do about it. She told Ann she would address the issue with the principal, or she would even talk to Kamoshida himself if the problem persisted.

She wanted to ask her dad for advice, but again, if he knew about a male teacher who may have been eyeing the female students provocatively, he would have put the man in a coma.

She was currently holed up in the library, as usual, prepping for exams. Her mom always told her she studied too much and needed a new hobby, but Makoto actually enjoyed it. She liked the sense of pride she would feel when she would tell her parents she had perfect marks on her tests. She enjoyed being the person others would come to when they needed help studying. It made her feel *good, useful* .

One small irritation about her after-school studying had been the

frequent table-side chats with Kamoshida. Not to her surprise, when the chair next to her moved back, she closed her eyes and slowly pushed her books out of her way.

“Studying hard, I see.” Kamoshida also had a creepy way of speaking to people. His smile only added to it. “You take your tests very seriously. Such a diligent student.”

She cut to the chase. “Is there something I can do for you?”

He dropped one arm on the table and placed the side of his face in his palm. “I hear the track team has officially disbanded.”

Hearing this, she fully turned her attention to him and his widening smile. “That doesn’t make any sense.” And it didn’t. The track team had been winning competitions over the city, earning recognition and climbing up into a regional sensation. They were good enough to think about going to nationals, so why all of the sudden would they *stop?*

She was pulled from her thoughts when he leaned into her personal space. “When the star athlete goes off the rails and attacks me, the members want nothing more to do with him and everything falls apart.”

Had something happened to Sakamoto? She may not have liked him, but she would never wish him any harm. He didn’t show up for class half the time, and the other half of the time he was hours late, but he truly loved to run. He was apparently very good at it. It was how he had been accepted into Shujin, which helped her understand how good he really was.

“Truly is a shame, though,” Kamoshida added with a wave of his free hand. “But quite a few students are now eager to start playing for me if I coached volleyball.”

Makoto couldn’t wrap her head around what was happening, so she reached for her books instead. No sooner did she put a hand on a page did he reach out and place his much larger one over hers. She was quick to retract it from under him, but his rejected hand came to rest on the back of her chair.

“I bet I could turn you into a professional in no time. It looks like you’ve got quite the body for it.” His tone made her sick to her stomach. She caught him eying her up and down as she felt his arm fall off the chair and around her back. When his hand flattened itself against the middle of her back, she quickly came to her feet and grabbed her bag sitting on the floor.

“I-I’m sorry, but…I, um, I need to go.”

“Let me see you to the gates.”

She knew it would be rude to turn down his generosity, but she also knew it wasn’t *generosity* that motivated him. She couldn’t help but nod once as she gathered up her scattered books and put them into her school bag. For most of the walk down the stairs, Kamoshida spoke of his time on the Olympic team and how life-changing the games had been for him. She tried to be kind and listen, but between the arrogance in his voice and the occasional hand on the exposed part of her neck, it took a lot more effort to not turn around and punch him.

“I’ll have open tryouts. I sure hope to see you there, Miss President.”

She almost bolted when he held open the front door for her to pass through. She mumbled a goodbye and bowed to him before she did just that. Her heart didn’t stop pounding until she reached her room and slammed the door shut behind her.

She put on her best act when her mom asked about her odd behavior, but Makoto told her she was just stressed out with the exams approaching.

Her mom questioned her a few more times, but she stood her ground. She kept reminding herself that her dad would be *furious* and the family didn’t need any more tension over something that could have just been all in her head.

But when she saw Ryuji at the end of the week after class, his leg in a cast and a cold air about him, she knew she had to do something. She told herself that she needed to talk to him. He was a student and he was her responsibility. So despite the little voice in the back

of her head telling her it was a stupid idea, she took a deep breath and approached him.

“S-Sakamoto-kun?”

He looked right at her, but she could tell he wasn’t looking *at* her. “The hell you want?”

She wiped her hands on the front of her skirt before meeting his eyes again. “I-I was hoping I could speak to you.”

He turned to face the wall next to him. “Ain’t nothin’ you can do.”

The sorrow in his voice made her heart hurt. “I can listen to you if you need someone to talk to.”

When he glanced over at her, he eyed her curiously, as if to challenge her statement. She maintained eye contact with him until he finally sighed. He opened his mouth, but before he could get any words out, his eyes narrowed with a rage Makoto had never seen from anyone before.

She realized his anger wasn’t directed at her when she felt an arm wrap around her shoulders and pull her away from him. “Trying to spread your lies to a beautiful lady now, are you?”

Makoto’s instinctual reaction to Kamoshida’s touch was to elbow him in the stomach, but then she remembered where she was and who *he* was. Ryuji, however, lifted one of his crutches and screamed at the older man.

“You’re the one who broke my effin’ leg, you bastard!”

“Sakamoto, stop.” Makoto held up her hands, hoping to get through to Ryuji before he brought his weapon of choice down over one of their heads. “There’s no need to attack.”

“He broke my leg!”

Kamoshida pulled her farther away from Ryuji like he was a prince saving her from an evil villain. The scenario made her sick. “You can keep spouting your lies, Sakamoto, but you should be getting your

rest.”

She felt so helpless. Regardless of the truth behind Ryuji’s admission, she still wanted to help him. He was usually loud and obnoxious, but never this *angry* . She didn’t have any proof other than a gut feeling telling her that Kamoshida was a perverted sociopath, but surely the police would investigate the claim of an assault on a student.

How she would go about addressing the issue with her father was not something she had the mindset to think about at the time.

At least Kamoshida released her and came to stand between her and Ryuji, who kept his eyes on the man but lowered his crutch to the floor. “That’s a good boy,” Kamoshida said as he took a few steps closer to Ryuji. “Now, stop sending the cops after me and twisting things around to make me the bad guy when you know this was your fault.”

Kamoshida was within striking distance, almost daring Ryuji to attack. So, Makoto wedged herself between them to avoid another confrontation. “That’s enough.” She heard Kamoshida snicker and step back a few paces, but Ryuji continued to growl in anger.

“Bastard doesn’t think I can do nothin’,” he told her through gritted teeth. “We’ll see about that.”

Before Makoto could find the heart to ask him if he was okay, he hobbled down the hall in the opposite direction. As she watched him go, her heart sank into her stomach. This was a serious accusation made by a student on a teacher. She *had* to do something. But if Kamoshida was correct in saying the police couldn’t do much, what could *she* possibly do for Ryuji? Offer him an ear to speak to? What more could she say to him other than an apology that wouldn’t mean anything?

No. She had to look more into this. Ryuji was one student. If Kamoshida was willing to go after one, he could go after another, especially since he thought he could get away with it. She turned on her heel and did her best not to glare at Kamoshida.

“Did you break his leg?”

The older man seemed surprised by her direct question, but then he threw his head back and laughed. “That’s a cute look you’ve got there, Niijima-san.” While she stumbled over the inappropriate comment, he ran a hand over his face. “It was an accident. I swear that to you. He was tired of me pushing the team too hard, so he attacked me. I only tried to defend myself.”

“Sakamoto is half your size.” As soon as the words left her mouth, she regretted them. Something cold and unsettling landed in the pit of her stomach. Kamoshida took a step towards her, but when she tried to take a matching step back, he grabbed her wrist.

“I’ll let it slide this time, Niijima, but don’t forget that I’m also five times *your* size.” He squeezed her wrist enough that she winced in pain before he dropped it. She rubbed the sore spot with her other hand while Kamoshida flashed a dark grin. “Have a wonderful evening.”

She stood in the hallway once she was alone, holding her wrist in her hand for several minutes. She finally shook her head and picked up the bag she had dropped at one point during the altercation. She leaned back against a wall, held a hand to her chest, and tried to tell herself she had imagined the entire thing.

Ryuji had broken his leg in a scuffle caused by other teenagers he would get in fights with.

Kamoshida was just a kind teacher who wanted to protect female students from male delinquents like Ryuji.

Her wrist was tender only because she had been writing too hard and too much for a few days.

Her shaking figure was due to the cooler temperature now that it was getting late.

Makoto blinked and she was home, sitting down at the dinner table, unable to force herself to eat anything.

She was grateful her dad wasn’t home or he would have questioned

her relentlessly. “Are you okay, Makoto?”

It hurt to admit it, but she could lie to her mother. “I’m just not feeling well.”

Maybe. “You’ve been acting like this for a few days.” Makoto tried not to sink any further in her seat. “What’s wrong?”

She had a terrible problem of over-analyzing too fast in her mind and then she burned out before she could speak her answer. She also had a hard time maintaining eye contact when she was lying, which was something her dad would always notice immediately.

“I don’t think I’m cut out for student council president.”

It wasn’t the main problem she was dealing with, but it had been a concern of hers for a while. The entire event after school with Ryuji and Kamoshida had only amplified her worries.

“Why do you think that?”

Her mom had a way of speaking that seemed to melt all of her anxiety away. Makoto clasped her hands together under the table to keep herself from getting *too* emotional and setting off alarm bells in her mother.

She exhaled before she spoke. “I’m worried I’m not doing enough for the students.”

Makoto could feel her mom’s eyes on her for the longest time. Did she doubt her? Was she trying to think of something to tell her because she believed Makoto *wasn’t* doing a good enough job but didn’t want to tell her that?

“You’re one person, honey,” she finally said, to which Makoto lifted her head and looked at her for the first time all night. “You can only do so much. But you would be surprised how far just listening to people can go.”

She made a promise that night that she would make herself available for Ryuji if he needed to vent, or to any other student who had a problem. She would take them each more seriously, be more

invested in the person speaking. She wouldn’t think of it as a *job* , but as a way to help others in a way maybe someone else couldn’t.

She just hoped it would be enough.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7

A loud smack on his desk caused Akihiko to straighten up in his seat.

“What the hell is this?”

It took him half a second to register where he was and who was speaking to him. He never slept very well to begin with, but over the past few weeks, he had barely slept at all. Between trying to find some sort of justice for Ryuji, coming up empty on his search of Kaneshiro, and more recently, worried that something was happening with Makoto, it was hard to shut his mind off for two minutes.

But, he told himself that he could do more when he was *awake* .
“What is what?”

He glanced down at the paperwork his superior had dropped on his desk. “Last I checked, you were assigned Kabukicho, not Aoyama.”

Try as he might, Akihiko couldn’t stop some of his disdain from creeping out in his tone. “I’m a cop, and last *I* checked, an assault was a crime.”

The chief crossed his arms as Akihiko leaned back in his chair. “Yes, a disrespectful teenager was brutally beaten by an upstanding citizen.” The man laughed coldly. “I didn’t peg you for a softy, Sanada.”

“Did you even *read* my report?” He watched the man’s face twist into a sneer. “Or did you stop when you saw who the victim was?”

A hand slammed the top of the folder with his report. “You have no facts to this alleged crime. That boy would point the finger at anyone he could to get attention!”

“Well, he didn’t, did he?” Akihiko stood up and glared at the man across from him. “Suguru Kamoshida is twice Sakamoto’s size. He didn’t act out in self-defense. If he had, Sakamoto would have suffered a broken rib or a nose. Not a broken *leg* .”

The chief matched his glare with one of his own. “I’m denying your arrest warrant.” It took more willpower than he thought not to come across the desk and slug the man. “Stick to what you do best and collar criminals in *your* district and leave the innocent citizens alone.”

Akihiko didn’t say another word as he watched his superior walk away with a grin on his face. He had a feeling this would happen, but it didn’t make him feel any better. He *knew* Ryuji and he knew him well enough to trust him. Sure he was a hothead and most other people saw a disturbed young man, but he wasn’t. He was a good kid who just never had anyone believe in him, outside of his own mother. Akihiko had grown up with outcast children and teenagers, being one himself, and he knew that with the right people in someone’s life, it made a hell of a difference.

He remembered the promise he had made on Shinji’s deathbed. He wouldn’t let another troubled youth fall victim to their regrets. He wouldn’t watch another young man or woman throw their life away because they didn’t fit in well with society.

So, he knew he had to do something for Ryuji. It pissed him off that his first attempt had backfired, but he would find another way. He had to. The kid literally had the one thing he loved in his life violently taken away from him with no remorse. How the hell did the higher-ups think this kind of behavior was *acceptable?*

It was hard, but he waited outside the gates of Shujin for Ryuji that same day. He deserved to know the truth, regardless of what that would do to his spirit. He knew that Makoto was coming home later because of her student council responsibilities, and Ryuji was not one to linger after the last bell, so he knew that he could catch Ryuji without running into his daughter. After a few students left the school grounds, Ryuji came into his sight, a familiar frown on his face.

He carefully approached him, but it was Ryuji who spoke first. “I dunno if I’m in the mood for talkin, man.”

“Let’s go get something to eat.”

The scowl on the teen’s face disappeared, but his usual bright demeanor didn’t surface. “Guess I got nothin’ better to do.”

For the most part, the train ride into Shibuya was quiet with the occasional conversation topics centering around Akihiko’s work. He didn’t mention the denied arrest warrant on the train, trying to keep things light while people were around. He told him about some random arrests he had made over the weeks, ranging from typical juvenile punks picking fights to pestering hosts, but Ryuji never once showed the same excitement over his stories as he had before his injury.

He knew how it felt to believe the future was ripped out from under him. But he also knew the wound was still very fresh to the boy, so any words of encouragement would translate to pity and make things worse.

There was a slight change in Ryuji when they sat down at their usual spot at the counter of the beef bowl shop. The teen grabbed a pair of chopsticks from the cylinder in front of him, broke them open, and watched as the cooks prepared their meal.

“Man, I didn’t think I was gonna want to eat, but I’m *starvin’* now!”

Akihiko gave off a light laugh, but he was happy to see Ryuji coming out of his shell. “Just because you’re taking a break doesn’t mean you can slack on your diet.”

Any one of his friends from his past would have rolled their eyes at him, but Ryuji laughed. “As long as I’ve got some good beef bowl, I’m gonna make one hell of a recovery!”

The admission forced a light-hearted chuckle from him. “You’ve got the right attitude, Sakamoto. You’d be surprised what positivity can do for healing.”

Ryuji gave him a cocky look. “Pretty sure you’re a cop, dude, not a doctor.”

Akihiko always felt insecure talking about his past with people other

than Minako and *maybe* his kids, but anything he could do to help Ryuji, he would do. Not that he expected his life story to help him at all, but…maybe he could shed some light on his dark outlook of the future.

He kept his stories focused on parts of his life that Ryuji could relate to. “I was on the boxing team in high school, and trust me, I had my fair share of moments when I didn’t think I was going to fight again. My first year, I broke my hand. Punched a wall and found a stud.”

Ryuji stared at him in wonder, hearing for the first time he was some kind of athlete, then burst out into laughter. “I can’t see you bein’ too pissed off!”

He didn’t tell him that he had punched the wall because Mitsuru had locked him in his dorm room as punishment for sneaking out at night. “My second year, I got into a fight with a neighborhood kid and he dislocated my shoulder.”

He also didn’t tell Ryuji that “neighborhood kid” was short for Shinji and that his friend had just been through a traumatic event (the death of Ken’s mother) that Akihiko had been extremely insensitive to at the time. Maybe not *insensitive* as much as he had tried and tried to push him to move on. He found out that night just how well Shinji could fight when pissed off.

“My senior year was the worst. I was in another fight and broke several ribs and spent a few days in the hospital. The doctor actually told me that he didn’t think he would clear me for my last year.”

“Man, you sure were an angry kid,” Ryuji snickered. “Can’t come down on me no more about fights and shit.”

Akihiko didn’t tell him that the fight that had hospitalized him had been during the twenty-fifth hour against a shadow strong enough to make quick work of his persona. Had he not been right outside the dorm, he probably would have been killed.

“My point is,” he added with a shrug of his shoulders. “That each time, the doctor told me I wasn’t going to be able to go back into the ring. But I didn’t listen to him. I found other ways to train while my

injury healed. I did everything I could to be ready for when the doctor cleared me. I didn't sit around and put my life on hold just because of a minor setback. And I can honestly tell you from *experience* , that it made me recover faster than what the doctor thought possible."

Ryuji grew quiet. Even after the steaming bowl of food was placed in front of him, he made no move to eat. It got to a point where Akihiko started to feel uncomfortable, but just as he was going to ask if he was okay, Ryuji turned to him.

"Will you help me, then?"

He was taken back by the look in the boy's eyes and he almost dropped his chopsticks. "What?"

Utensils between his fingers, Ryuji threw a punch in front of him. "You were a boxer, yeah? Will you teach me, since, ya know, I can't run."

Akihiko almost told him that he needed good footwork to be a good boxer, but he realized that Ryuji was taking his advice into consideration. While he recovered from his broken leg, he would focus his strength on something else.

He broke out into a smile. "Of course."

There was some of the familiar life back in Ryuji's eyes and it warmed Akihiko immensely. Until he heard the teen mumble, "Then I'll show that bastard what's up."

Akihiko's shoulders dropped with his sigh. "I'm not going to help you if you're going to attack your teacher."

Ryuji stiffened, likely not expecting him to hear his words, then tossed a sliver of beef in his mouth. "Nah, I won't physically take him out or nothing, but it would be nice to see his face when he realizes he ain't keepin' me down!"

As much as Akihiko didn't want to bring it up, he couldn't keep it to himself any longer. "Sakamoto, while I'm extremely happy you have this attitude, I want you to know that I'm sorry." He took a deep breath before finishing his train of thought. "I asked for his arrest,

but…it was denied."

He didn't know what kind of reaction to expect from Ryuji, but it sure as hell wasn't a simple shrug of the shoulders and wave of the hand. "It's cool man. I appreciate the attempt. Didn't think anything was gonna happen anyway. I know I ain't a great kid."

Something sharp poked him in the chest. "It doesn't give him the right to attack you, nor does that give anyone else a right to think his actions were excusable."

Ryuji took him by surprise again. "Well, no, but I bet he ain't gonna expect me to push through this." The boy turned to him with a smile, but Akihiko had a hard time believing it was genuine. "He can break my leg, but he sure as hell ain't gonna break my spirit."

He was quiet that night when he finally got home. Every time he wanted to ask Makoto how school was, he immediately thought of Kamoshida. It was enough of an unsettling image that he left the table without touching his dinner. (He hadn't really eaten much at the beef bowl shop either).

He was about to change out of his work clothes when Minako shut the door to their room with a click that caught his attention. She had a sad look in her eyes that he felt guilty about, but she also wore a crooked smile.

"Well, don't let me stop you."

Even though he had been upset for quite some time, he still found himself blushing at her insinuation. "I-I just need some air."

She stepped into him and hooked her thumbs underneath his shirt. "What's wrong?"

Gods, he could be the angriest person alive and *one touch* from her could calm him down completely. "I think I worry too much."

"I think you worry the right amount," she told him, her hands deftly unfastening the buttons on his shirt. "I just think you don't want anyone *else* to worry."

She placed her arms around his neck while he rested his hands on her hips. “I don’t want to worry you, or Makoto, with scenarios that might only be my imagination.”

“You both act like I don’t notice these things.” She held onto him tighter. “And sometimes I want to give you both your space. But, maybe I shouldn’t. Maybe I should be more forceful about getting you both to talk to me.”

His arms wrapped around her back as his face fell to her shoulder. “I don’t want either of you to see the things that I see when I close my eyes.”

One of her hands found its way into his hair, fingers slowly moving up and down, until his fatigue hit him like a train. “I wish you could see what I see when my eyes are open.” She kissed him below his jawline, her hand still working in his hair. “It’s heartbreaking watching you, and now Makoto, hide from me like I’m one of the monsters you see in your nightmares.”

That got him to pull away from her. “That’s not true.”

“Aki.” The way she said his name nearly broke his heart. “I want you to talk to me.” She lifted her hand to his face. “Please.”

He suddenly became far too weak to stand, so he dropped to the edge of the bed, Minako coming to sit beside him. “I’ve been trying to help a student at Makoto’s school. He accused his coach of breaking his leg, so I took on his case. But no one seems to take the kid seriously. And since the man is a teacher, I’m terrified that he’s not going to stop with one victim.” He threw his head into his hands. “I’m terrified he’s going to hurt Makoto, and there’s *nothing* I can do.”

He felt her hand on his back and another on his arm. “They won’t fire him?”

“They won’t do *anything* , Minako.” He gripped his hair painfully, hoping to rid himself of the images from his nightmares. “Everyone believes Sakamoto is a rowdy and misbehaved child. That he had it coming. Kamoshida acted out in self-defense. The case is buried beneath a mountain of paperwork the city is just going to burn and

pretend never happened. The more I push for his arrest, or *some* kind of justice, I'm met with the reminder that this *isn't my fucking job!"*

After a few minutes passed in silence, Akihiko quickly stood up and walked to the closet. "I need to go for a run."

No sooner did he shed his dress shirt and throw on something more appropriate did he feel Minako's hand on his wrist. "You have every right to be angry, Aki." She pulled on his arm until they were both facing each other. "And you should be very angry. But, you should also be proud that you were willing to help someone that most people would have turned away."

His hands clenched. "What good am I to anyone if I can't do anything to right the wrongs?"

"Aki…"

He pulled away from her. "What if he hurts Makoto? What the hell am I going to tell her then, when she's suffering from broken bones and a broken spirit and all I can say to her is that *I tried* to stop him but I *couldn't?!"* He turned around and slammed the bottom of his fist into the wall. "How many students am I going to have to talk to who suffer at his hands before the city knows he's not the man he's pretending to be?"

This time, she didn't try and stop him as he finished changing into something less stiff and uncomfortable and made his way to the bedroom door.

"I wish I knew what to say to you."

Her voice was so quiet and full of raw emotion that he almost broke the door off the frame. But he didn't stop. He had no idea how far he ran or how long he was out, but he sure as hell didn't feel any better when he stepped back inside. He knew he had upset Minako, and he was pretty sure Makoto had heard his shouting. But he pulled himself together after a quick shower, then he fell into the bed beside Minako. When she didn't stir awake, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her into him.

He knew he wasn’t going to sleep, but he felt so much better with someone he loved safe in his arms.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8

She knew this day was coming.

She had plenty of time to prepare for it.

She wasn't going to cry.

She wasn't going to make a scene.

She would act her age.

But…

"M-Mom! Let me go!"

She couldn't.

"You have to call me every hour on the hour or I'm going to send your father on the first train out of the city!"

Makoto again tried and failed to remove herself from her hold. "I'm just going to Kyoto. It's not that far."

"Yes, well," Minako pulled away from Makoto, much to the younger's delight, and shot a grin to Akihiko, who was fiddling around with something on his phone while sitting on the arm of the couch. "A lot of sex-depraved teenage boys like to hide out in hot springs and spy on unsuspecting girls, so I've heard."

It was hard not to laugh when Akihiko fumbled his phone and it fell to the floor. Makoto didn't seem to take her comment seriously. "I'm pretty sure there's two separate bathhouses for each gender."

Minako put a hand on her hip. "Doesn't really keep them out."

Before Makoto could question her, Akihiko stood from the couch and cleared his throat. "What your mother is trying to say is, be safe, but

have fun."

Makoto nodded and Minako gave her one final "Mom Hug" before her daughter begged to be released. "I seriously want you to call before you go to bed each day, okay?"

She promised her she would, then stood in front of her dad. "If I see a boy acting like a pervert, I'll be sure to report him immediately." Minako shot a hand to her mouth as Makoto gave him a quick hug, then turned to grab her bag by the door. "I will let you know when I get there."

She came to stand beside Akihiko and wrapped her arm around his back. She giggled when she noticed he was still very tense. "Be safe!"

Makoto offered one last smile before she closed the door behind her. Once the door clicked in place, Akihiko released a breath and ran a hand through his hair. "Don't lump me in with Junpei and Ryoji. I didn't know what they were doing."

She laughed as she slid her other arm around his waist. "You still get so upset by it." She looked up at him as he frowned and turned his head. "It's cute."

Of all the things she thought would die out in their thirty plus years together, making him blush was not one of them. She loved it. It made her feel like they were young and falling in love with each other all over again. Like they had a thousand more years together, just the two of them, laughing and smiling and just being loved.

Sometimes she thought her squealy high school romantic self was a little too much for him now. But he was the type that would tell her to stop, just…not one to tell her he enjoyed it. However, if she was being honest with herself, the little signs he gave off were more than enough to tell her that he did like it.

To prove her point, she ran her fingers up his stomach and over his chest before her palm rested over his heart. "Well, now that it's just me and you, what are we going to do with all this time?"

She felt one of his hands stop right below her hip as he relaxed. “Something we won’t be doing is telling Makoto about all of the stupid things I got pressured into doing in high school.”

“The fact you’re still this upset about it is seriously the most adorable thing in the world,” she added with a laugh, leaning back to look up at him. “I’ll make sure to use this as leverage more often.”

The slight flush of his face made her smile widen. “Y-You can’t be serious?”

“Then I suggest you make these next few days count so I can forgive you again.”

And she meant it. Not so much to make him feel like she was still upset with him over something that had happened years ago, but because of what was happening now. He had been so miserable the past few weeks, unable to sleep, staying later at work, letting every disappointment tear him down. It hurt watching him slip further away from her. So she told herself that when Makoto would be gone for her school trip, she would do everything she could to fix him.

She needed him to open up to her instead of closing himself off. The best way she thought she could do that was ease him into it, almost like she had to do when they first met, but with three days instead of three years. She also knew he was more at ease with her when she was playful and flirty. Odd considering this kind of behavior was what he avoided like the plague when he was younger, but, she grew on him. She was proud of that.

He started off on a good note and kissed the top of her head. “I’ll make sure to come home early from work this week then.” And then their lips met, and it took more strength to let him go than to make a grab for his jacket and pull him back into her. “I love you.”

She gave him a small, but warm smile as he made his way to the door. “I love you too, Aki.”

When he was gone, she was suddenly consumed with the realization that she was alone. She knew it was silly; it wasn’t her first time alone after being married and having kids. But Sae was out

of the house, doing her own thing, living her own life. Makoto was almost to that point in her life, too. She didn't like to think about it, but now that it was in her mind, it overwhelmed her.

What was going to happen once Makoto left? Would Akihiko really stick around without Makoto to act as some sort of buffer? Would she keep fighting for their marriage when she finally got tired of dealing with Akihiko's mood swings? She loved him, she really did, but for the majority of their relationship, they were never alone.

She suddenly had the desire for another child. Or for Sae to find a nice man and get married and have kids of her own. She didn't want to think about the idea with Makoto, but maybe in a few years. A dog? Would Akihiko let her get a puppy just so she didn't have to be alone with him? Would he even know that's why she wanted a dog?

Minako thought it best to find something to do before her thoughts became too much for her. She needed to go out and get a few things, so she decided to head out now to be back in time for Akihiko's supposed "early" return home.

She stopped at a few places she hadn't been to since she had lived in Tokyo. She took a train into Tokyo station and walked around the East Gardens, went to see the Imperial Palace, stopped in some of the department stores in the Marunouchi district. She thought about coming back to the area with Akihiko, even if he had been out this way before. It was peaceful, calming, and she wanted to share something new with him.

Maybe they could travel when he had time off work. He really liked to be outdoors, by bodies of water, things that Tokyo couldn't quite offer him, even if he claimed it was "better to train" with more open spaces. She had never been up to Hokkaido, or even a town as close as Nikko. She would love to go back to an island like Yakushima, or one of the islands closer to Tokyo. She briefly wondered if he would even want to go somewhere with her, but the second the thought crossed her mind, she chastised herself.

She knew he would love to go on a trip with her. Maybe somewhere close, maybe on the outskirts of Tokyo, after Makoto graduated…

Her phone vibrated in her pocket and it scared her. She reached for it and saw a text from Makoto. *I've made it to Kyoto safely. I will call you before I go to bed.*

Minako suddenly realized she had no idea what time it was. It wasn't a day trip to get to Kyoto, but it was still quite a distance. She hadn't even stopped by the store yet. How the hell did she lose track of time?

She sighed, made her way to the station, and tried to tell herself it wasn't a big deal. This was what she wanted: a distraction. And she got it. It was too early for Akihiko to be surprising her by coming home anyway. However, she didn't make any other stops on the way back home except for at the store. She bought what she needed, left, then walked the rest of the way home.

When everything was in its respected place in the apartment, Minako continued to stand in the kitchen. Maybe Akihiko wasn't the only one with mood swings; here she was, unable to keep her thoughts from going from happy to sad to pissed to broken. She would address the idea of traveling with him when he got home. She was sure he would love to go back to Iwatodai for a visit, catch up with their old friends, walk down the same sidewalks and roadways where they used to always hold hands…

She jumped in her place when she heard the door open. She didn't think Akihiko would be home this early, but when she came out of the kitchen, she saw him standing there, hands behind his back, and a surprised look on his face.

The mere sight of him made her want to cry, but she just smiled instead. "You really meant it when you said you would be home early."

He looked away from her, color rising to his face. "I, uh, I actually took a half day today. I just had to make a stop on my way home." He cleared his throat. "I have something for you."

She didn't even want anything besides him, but when she approached him, he held out a small bouquet of purple flowers. It took her a few seconds to get over the shock before she realized

they were lilacs.

Through the tears building in her eyes, she asked, “These are for me?”

He rubbed the back of his neck while his face darkened. “Well, yes. The lady at the shop said these would better suit my feelings for you than the roses I wanted to give you.”

She took them from his hand and ran a hand under her eyes. “Your feelings?”

“Minako, I know I’m not the best person to be with.” He kept his eyes on the floor, but the nervousness was gone from his tone. “I know I don’t make you happy all the time. I know I don’t act like I’m happy all the time. Because…” He paused and her breath caught in her throat. “Because I’m not happy all the time. But every single time you speak to me, you reach out to me, you kiss me, I become happy again.”

She felt the tears fall from her eyes when he looked at her and held her gaze. She saw the determination burning in his eyes just as strongly as when he had to fight for his chance to marry her. “We’ve been through hell, I keep putting you through hell, but I’ll go through any hell I have to as long as I get to be with you in the end.”

She tightened her grip on the flowers and threw her arms around him, burying her head into his shoulder. He returned the embrace, holding on to her as if a single breeze would take her away from him forever. He held her for the longest time, but she only leaned back because she wanted to see him.

“I love you, Aki.”

He leaned in until their foreheads touched. “And I love you, Minako.” She made a move to kiss him, but he took a small step back. “I want to take you out.”

While she was initially confused as to why he didn’t want to kiss her back, she was overcome with joy that he wanted to go out, in public, with her. And she was touched, she was, but it wasn’t necessarily

what she wanted right now. “I don’t want to go out.”

He tensed at her comment, not at all expecting her to deny the request. “W-What? Why?”

She only answered him with a kiss that she didn’t let him escape from. She didn’t let him go until she pushed him down onto their bed and hovered over him.

“I have everything I’ll ever want right here,” she whispered before she claimed his lips again.

It was the first time in a long time that she woke up feeling happy.

It was the first time in a long time that she saw a smile on his face when he woke up next to her.

It was the first time in a long time that she felt that they would always be together.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9

Akihiko used to love the end of the year.

The colder weather always made for excellent training, harder running conditions, and best of all, the start of his relationship with Minako. She seemed so much brighter with the change in temperature since she used that as an excuse to snuggle up with him, force him to lay around with her for a day or two, and wear his clothes. If she was happy, then so was he. He may never have told her over the years how much he cherished the little things she would do, but he knew she *knew* .

But then Sae walked out of their life and it hadn't been the same since.

Akihiko had only contacted her once outside of her visit with him in the hospital. He wanted to tell her congratulations for her victory with his assailant, and he did, to which she told him it was her job and ended the call. He had been tempted numerous times to reach out to her, but every time he held his phone in his hand, he hesitated. In his hesitation, he began to think, worry, remember this was *his* fault, and eventually gave up making the call.

Regardless, his overall attitude seemed to be getting better, even if Sae wasn't willing to talk to him. After the few days he had spent with Minako with no kids, he was able to remind himself that he still had someone who loved him, who would accept his shortcomings, and would stick it out with him until the end. He also came to realize just how much his depression had hurt her. So he told her every single day Makoto was on her trip that he would talk to her every night about stupid, asinine topics, his work, his fears, just so she didn't have to *worry.*

He was able to sleep better. He was able to feel like he was a better husband, a better father for Makoto. He was able to believe that things were actually getting better.

But no matter how much he told himself that, winter brought a wave of regret that he didn't think Minako would be able to talk him out of.

He lost his sister in winter.

He lost his best friend in winter.

He lost a partner in winter.

He lost his daughter in winter.

It became a season of *loss* rather than one of joy that he could feel around others when he was out and about. He allowed himself a fraction of a second to be angry, to hate those who were able to spend time with their families, their friends, and be so *happy.*

"You're scowling again."

Akihiko blinked and he was suddenly sitting on the couch in the living room, Minako on the floor in front of him with a few opened boxes surrounding her. Makoto came to stand beside her and reached into one of the boxes to pull out a string of lights.

Right. They were decorating for Christmas. Like they did every year on the first Sunday in December.

He never understood why Minako had been so adamant about decorating for the holiday. She told him once when Sae was a baby that it would be fun to have a family tradition since he was going to keep them from going out together for the end of the year holiday festivities. She later admitted to him that the *real* reason she wanted to decorate was because she loved Christmas lights, the sparkle they brought to his eyes, the tranquility they brought over both of them, the memories of the promise he made to her their first Christmas Eve together that he still kept to this day. While he had been touched by her words, all she really had to do was tell him she wanted to do it and he would have let her.

He realized that even though Minako didn't ask a question, she was still waiting for a response. "Sorry," was the only good one he could come up with. He heard her sigh, then she pushed one of the boxes towards him.

“I’m going to be very disappointed if Makoto does all the decorating.”

Her tone was playful, but he heard Makoto come to her own defense quickly. “Hey! I do a good job!”

Akihiko sighed as he stood from his spot on the couch, stretched out his back, and rolled his shoulders. “I don’t think your mother likes it when she gets her hair caught in the strands you can’t hang high enough.”

Minako smiled at him and continued rummaging through boxes without getting up. Makoto huffed in annoyance and put a hand on her hip. “I would if you let me stand on the chair!”

“Last time you did that, you fell and almost broke your neck.”

Makoto walked up to him and shoved the strands of lights into his hand. “Fine. Then you do it and I’ll judge your terrible color coordination.”

He was never one to back down from a challenge, but he *really* didn’t know why it mattered which colors went where and which strands to mix with others. He looked down at the lights in his hand, sighed, then turned back to where Makoto had come to stand next to her mother.

“If you don’t like the way I do things, then you’ll just have to help me.”

And she helped him mixed the blues with the silvers, a good snow effect, she called it. She twisted reds and whites together and handed them to him to go around some of the door frames. At one point, she tripped over a string of lights she had laid out on the floor, to which he made a comment about how if her footwork had been faster, she would have caught herself before she fell. She stood up, decorating put on the back burner, and threw a punch to his shoulder.

Minako finally told them to stop wrestling around after Makoto stepped on one of the tiny light bulbs. “Alright, enough. Let’s finish this up and *then* you can beat each other up.”

He wanted that night to last longer, but before he knew it, it was Christmas Eve. He didn't want to admit it, but it seemed that every year, he found it harder and harder to be happy. Even if Minako smiled at him and told him she loved whatever piece of jewelry he bought for her that year. Even when Makoto would hug him and thank him for whatever Buchimaru item he had found in some random place, he was still unable to kill that nagging thought in the back of his head.

Sae hates you. She hates you so much that she won't even come see her mother or her sister for the holidays just because you're there.

Granted Christmas wasn't widely celebrated in Japan, Minako had kept the tradition alive in the family for years. It was harder to go through with when Sae had left, but she did it anyway. Makoto always enjoyed the holiday, from the decorating at the beginning of the month to when she was able to open the presents she had been stumped on trying to figure out what was inside. She may never have asked for anything, but she was always a similar ball of energy and excitement every afternoon when he came home from work.

But there was always something keeping all of them from being truly happy, and he felt the pressure build up more and more every year until he felt his ribs crack under the weight.

Or maybe he forgot how much Makoto wanted the special edition Buchimaru plush toy that had been hard as hell to find, but he managed to snag the last one a few months ago.

"Thank you so much, Dad!" She squeezed him harder, a big smile on her face and eyes sparkling with delight. "You're the best!"

"You're going to break him in half if you don't let him go, Makoto." Minako wore a similar, but less intense expression. Both of their smiles made him feel like he was the most amazing person alive, even if he didn't deserve to feel that way. He gave Makoto a much lighter hug before she pulled away from him to examine her new gift.

Minako had walked into the kitchen to start prepping their traditional afternoon lunch while Akihiko sat down beside Makoto and

examined the book her mother had gotten for her. He was surprised when he flipped it open and found out it was a cooking book.

“You wanted a cookbook?”

Makoto didn’t look over at him as she inspected her plushie for the hundredth time. “When I go on to college, I’m not going to eat out all the time.” The fact she would be leaving the household in a little over a year sent a cold chill down his spine. “Mom told me this is how she learned first, then she watched people, then she did her own thing.”

He didn’t say anything more to her as he continued to skim through the book. Makoto, however, elbowed him in the side and swiped the book from his hands. “Maybe you should ask Mom for a book so you don’t kill us all with the next meal you make.”

She made a move to stand up, but he looped an arm around her neck and pulled her back down. “I prefer to break people’s bones rather than poison them. It’s much more satisfying.”

Makoto struggled in his hold. “You’re getting too old to be breaking bones, Dad.”

He had a retort ready on his tongue when there was a knock on the door. They both went still before Makoto pushed out of his arms and got to her feet. She grabbed her Buchimaru toy from the floor and ran to the door. He called out to her to stop, a part of him worried that the person on the other side of the door wasn’t someone they knew, but she ignored him.

Had they been expecting company?

He was quick to his feet in case someone attacked, but when Makoto opened the door, the air left his lungs like he had been hit regardless.

“Sis! Look what Dad got me for Christmas!”

Sae stepped into the room, not at all noticing he was only a few meters in front of her. “You’re almost eighteen, Makoto. You need to start acting more your age.”

He held his breath as Makoto hugged the doll closer to her chest and Sae closed the door behind her. “Maybe you shouldn’t act like you're jealous.”

When Sae finally looked up at him, the entire world stopped. It was as if he had walked right into a black hole and the bright and cheerful mood of the morning was sucked right out of the room. He forced himself to breathe even if there was no oxygen going into his lungs. He didn’t know what emotion he was feeling the most, but there were several flooding his heart. He was thrilled to have his daughter over for a holiday she had been absent for eight years now. He was relieved to know that she was at least thinking of her sister and her mother, maybe not him, but she was here now.

But he was so scared that since she realized he was in the room, she was going to rush out the door and upset her sister on a day where they should have been spending time together.

The glare in Sae’s eyes made him even more afraid. “What are you doing here?”

Makoto quickly came to his defense. “Dad stayed home from work today to spend time with us!”

Sae glanced down at her sister, a softer expression on her face, before turning back to him with a colder one. “I wasn’t aware family holidays were your thing, Sanada.”

“Sae, stop it.”

Akihiko jumped (he was extremely wound up right now) as Minako came out of the kitchen and stood off to his side. There was a stern look on her face as she spoke, her voice more quiet than it should have been. “Your father has every right to be here.”

Sae opened her mouth to argue back, but he held up his hand. “No, it’s okay.” He barely managed to choke out a pathetic, “I’ll give you guys your space,” before he walked to the closet and grabbed his jacket.

Minako’s voice stopped him. “Don’t you dare walk away from her,

Akihiko."

Her tone literally froze him in his spot, hand on one arm of his jacket and the other leaning against the wall in front of him for support. He didn't want to stay and ruin this chance Sae had with her family. If he was going to be the reason for the fighting, he would give them their space.

"Why not? He's been doing that my entire life."

The tension in the room became a sharp blade that buried itself in his chest. He clenched his hands into fights, using what little strength he had left to keep himself from bashing a hole in the wall.

"This is enough, Sae." He cringed as Minako's voice grew harsher. "You've put him through enough. You need to let it go *!"*

Sae snorted at her. "Was this your plan all along?" He could literally feel Sae's rage setting fire to the space around him. "I told you I would come by so you could keep your family tradition, but not if he was going to be around. Yet now, after all this time, you decide enough is enough and think I'm going to *let it go?!"*

In the deadly silence that followed, Akihiko felt something in him snap. He didn't hold back when his fist slammed into the plaster above his head. He couldn't stop the burning in his eyes or the numbing in his throat. But through all the fear, regret, and heartache, he turned to face all three of them.

"I know that no matter what I tell you, you're always going to hate me." He tightened his fists until he was sure he was going to break his fingers. "But please, *please* don't take it out on your mother."

He was so emotionally drained that he felt like he was dying. He didn't even register that he had locked eyes with Minako and told her with a cracking voice, "I'll leave."

Surprisingly, she said nothing to him, only looked away in defeat, or did she want him to leave? He shook his head at the thought and threw his arms into his jacket sleeves as quickly as he possibly could and refused to make eye contact with anyone else. But before

he was able to reach the door, he felt something wrap around his stomach and squeeze the air out of his lungs.

“Don’t go.”

The voice was so strained and quiet that in his state of mind, he had no idea who had spoken to him, if someone had spoken to him at all. The second he felt something collide into his back, he knew exactly who it was.

Makoto repeated her plea. “Please, Dad. Please don’t go.”

He didn’t think it was possible for him to feel any *worse* , but he sure as hell did. Thirty minutes ago, Makoto was squealing in delight over her new gift, hugging him out of pure love, and now here she was, begging him not to walk away. Her hold didn’t crush him the same way his guilt did.

However…

“Right. I forgot that you would do anything for *her* .”

There was a tone in Sae’s voice that he had never heard before, but it actually made him *angry* rather than upset. It was a strong enough notion that for the first time since she walked in the room, he met her eyes with a glare.

“You know I would do the same for you, Sae.”

Her light laughter did little to ease the tension building in his shoulders. “Of course, you’re right. I can recall all the times you were so happy to take all *four* of us out as a proud father.” She tapped her forehead with her hand, as if her tone hadn’t been mocking enough. “Wait, no. I seem to be confusing Mother’s story of when you took Makoto out with all the times you told *me* that you were too afraid an imaginary bad guy would *look at us* .”

Akihiko told himself that Sae was venting, that she had been hurting for a *long* time. This was to be expected. And while he bit his tongue to keep from adding to her rage, it didn’t help her words sting any less or ring any less true.

Minako stepped between the both of them, her back to him and her shoulders slightly shaking. “This is enough. If this is all you have to say, then you can leave until you can accept that your father is going to be here.”

He wasn’t expecting Minako to speak in his defense, but Sae didn’t seem to be bothered by it. It made him sick to think that his own daughter had turned this cold because of him. “Very well. I would hate to follow in Sanada’s footsteps and bring more misery to a family that doesn’t deserve it.” She reached into her bag and pulled out a thick book and handed it to Makoto, who was still latched on to him. “I know you still have a year before you graduate, but when Mother told me you wanted to take the mock entrance exams, I thought you would like to have this.”

Makoto looked out to the book held in the air before she slowly detached herself from him. She ran a hand over her face and nodded once before she took the book into her hands. “T-Thank you, Sis.”

Sae smiled at her, a *genuine* smile, as she rested her hand on her little sister’s shoulder. “Keep studying and focusing on school.” She retracted her hand and lifted her eyes to look back at him, her lips turning more into a sadistic smirk than a smile. “After all, a *Niijima* succeeds no matter what the cost.”

She didn’t say another word before she swung the door open and slammed it shut once she was gone. The world began to spin far too fast for his liking. He didn’t know how he was able to take a seat on the couch without stumbling, but he threw his face into his hands and gripped at his hair painfully, clenching his teeth so he didn’t start screaming.

Not even a minute later, Minako came to sit next to him, her hand landing on the base of his neck. “She didn’t mean it. She’s just been so angry for so long and-,”

He stood up, took a step away from her, then turned to face her again. “If you didn’t want me to be here, why didn’t you just say something to me?” Both of his hands kept pulling at his hair, trying to contain the boiling question that was eating a hole in his heart.

“I never said that.”

She was quiet, but oftentimes when she was quiet in an argument, she *knew* she was guilty. It made him that much more angry. “Do you wait until I’m at work to have your family Christmas? Is that why you were so surprised that I said I would stay *home* this morning?!”

Minako sighed and folded her hands in her lap. “It was the only way I was able to see her.”

There was another crack somewhere deep within his subconscious. “Then don’t let me stop you.”

He was able to take two steps before she grabbed his arm. “I’m sorry, Akihiko. I am. But you have to understand, I had a choice to make.” She glared at him with tears in her eyes and he once again felt the knife in his heart. “I love you *both* . I wanted to have a relationship with my daughter. All she asked from me was to visit on my own time and not to physically bring you around, so I accepted. Because I spend two hours a month talking to her and every other minute is here, with you and Makoto. I’d like to think that’s fair.”

Whether or not she knew it, she pulled the knife out of his chest and stabbed him again. “You’ve been meeting with Sae once a *month?!”* When she said nothing and sighed deeply, he started to feel like he was losing his grip on reality. “All I ever wanted was *one minute* of her time! *A minute!* ”

Minako’s eyes narrowed and the mist in them faded away. “I let you make your decision, Akihiko, and I’ve tried to support you through the anguish you’ve put yourself in.” She took a step into him and balled her hands into fists. “If you wanted to see her, you could have. I didn’t tell her you were home today, even though I thought it wouldn’t end well, but I wanted to put you both in a room and let you sort it out for yourselves.” The tears returned to her eyes. “But *damn it,* you let this chance slip right through your fingers the *second* you cowered behind your regret and your fear! She’s your *daughter* , not your enemy!”

Minako spun around on her heels before he could say anything in response. “If you want to walk away, then go. I’m tired of stopping

you. I'm tired of trying to convince you you're not a horrible father. I'm tired of watching you suffer when I've done all I can do to save you."

He was happy to know that Minako, and likely Makoto, had been in touch with Sae for lord knows how long now. It hurt, but they didn't deserve Sae's wrath like he did. But what he felt so angry about was that for some time now, Minako had *planned* her favorite family tradition to exclude *him* , and then never said a word to him. He could have accepted it had she told him she wanted to see her daughter for Christmas, and that Sae wouldn't show up if he was there. He would have gladly given them their space and returned once they were done.

But she didn't.

That stung like a bitch.

He didn't have a right to be so angry with Minako, but he was. He at least needed some time to cool down before things escalated between them. He said nothing to her as he walked into their room and grabbed a bag he had used in the past for random out-of-town conferences or trainings. He made sure he had enough to cover him for at least a few nights, almost ripped the zipper off the bag when he shut it, then walked to the door without a word.

He heard footsteps approach from behind as he finished putting his shoes on and turned to find Makoto standing a few meters away. Her brand new Buchimaru plush doll rested on the floor by her feet. He looked away from her before her tears made him do or say something stupid.

"I just need some time to calm down, Makoto. I'll be back in a few days."

And he left before she had a chance to ask him to stay.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10

Makoto had been so eager to have a break from school before starting the last part of her second year, but that all changed when she felt everything fall apart.

So many things happened that were out of her control to stop. First and foremost, the tension in her family. Her dad had left on Christmas Eve and had been in and out of the apartment ever since. He usually didn't stay for more than two days at a time, apparently occupying his time with work since there was a slight increase in crime around New Year's. Her mom had been more angry, yelling at her sister over the phone when they spoke and yelling at her dad when he came home for a fresh set of clothes.

Makoto always stood there, hoping that she would wake up and her dad would be tucking her back in bed because she had a scary dream, or that her mom would hold her hand and tell her everything was fine and she was safe.

Which brought her to the second problem.

Over the remainder of the winter break, she thought it would be best to get her mind off her family issues by helping around at the school. She helped tutor a few students who were trying to be better prepared for the end of the year. She helped a few teachers out with their lesson planning. She tried to squash potential problems before they became a mess once school started again.

That was when she ran into a student who had looked like he had been in a fight. As student council president, she wanted to help, so she had tried to ask him what had happened. His eyes grew big, then he shook his head and said he was fine and scampered away. It was a red flag, but one she didn't know where to put.

Until she met with a second student a few days later. He was a timid boy, one she was trying to help tutor, but his mind always seemed to

be somewhere else. She noticed the black eye and a bandaged arm, but she didn't want to scare him like she had the last young man.

She chose to address his inability to focus rather than the injuries. "Um, Mishima-kun, you seem very distracted today."

The hand holding his head up fell to the table with a *thud* , his chin landing on his chest. "I-I'm sorry…Niijima-senpai…"

She placed her pencil down before leaning into the table to get a better look at his face. "Are you tired? Perhaps we should move the session to a better time in the afternoon."

He shook his head. "I have volleyball practice in the afternoon."

That was when it hit her.

Mishima was a member of the volleyball team, which had been an official school club since the end of the second term. She thought it was strange that the principal would create a new club when the year was almost over, but when she had asked, he told her that Kamoshida had big plans for a promising group of students and they needed the head start.

The other teen she had bumped into…he was a member, too. The only way she knew that was because of the club's uniform.

She couldn't refrain from asking the question. "Are your injuries from volleyball?"

He straightened his back immediately, eyes wide, and a terrified look on his face. "W-What?! N-No! I-I…I'm just…I'm not any good."

She let it go to save himself from aggravating his injuries any further, but she was able to make her own deductions as to what was going on. Kamoshida could push his team all he wanted, but bringing physical harm to his players was a line he didn't need to cross. However, she couldn't get into the gym during practices, so all she could do was try and force something out of one of the wounded students.

She wasn't surprised when they offered her nothing.

Makoto knew from her time watching her dad as a child that she needed solid evidence if she wanted to make a report good enough to submit to the principal. She wanted to talk to Sakamoto, as he had a similar experience with Kamoshida, but he wasn't a student who showed up at school when school was *in* session, let alone when there were no classes. She would have to wait a few more days to speak to him.

The only other person that stood out in her mind was Takamaki. She remembered her saying something once about how Kamoshida gave her the creeps (Makoto got that vibe, too) but last she recalled, she wasn't a volleyball player. And sadly, feeling uncomfortable around someone wasn't a good enough reason to get him fired.

Makoto went home and found herself walking in on another argument between her parents. She tried to be quiet so they wouldn't start yelling at her, but when her mom threatened her dad with the 'd' word, Makoto didn't care and stormed past them to her room, slammed her door, and promptly threw herself on her bed.

Her dad was the one who came into her room that night to talk to her, but for the first time in her life, she didn't want to listen. She wanted to be alone. He at least told her that he loved her and that he promised to try and work things out with her mother.

She was still slightly angry with both of them the next morning, but she used that to steel herself. She was going to talk to Kamoshida. It was her duty to the students to notice problems and address them. She wouldn't cower like her dad did when her sister had insulted him on Christmas. She wouldn't make promises that she couldn't keep like her mom did with her dad. She wouldn't go into an uncomfortable situation and make everything a thousand times worse like her sister did.

She knocked on his door with no hesitation, her head held high and her back straight.

The *second* he smiled at her, she felt all of that rush out of her system. "Niijima-san, what a pleasant surprise."

What was she thinking? If this man could physically abuse his players, what kind of chance did *she* stand against him? How could she excuse herself without looking like an idiot? How could she even *think* about walking away when ten seconds ago, she *vowed* she would put an end to this?

Her dad liked to tell her it was okay to pick and choose her battles, to not be afraid to walk away. That the ability to realize when one was outmatched was a skillset, not a weakness.

Well, she was here, she worked herself up for this, and she was going to see it through. “I was hoping for a minute of your time.”

He allowed her to step into the room, but she wisely chose to stay by the door in case she needed a quick escape. His smile never left his face. In fact, she could have sworn it became more perverse. “I’m willing to give you as much time as you need.”

Instead of taking a seat at his desk, he slid behind her and blocked her escape route. She felt her heart leap into her throat and it was very difficult to *think* . “I’ve noticed a few players on your team with injuries. I was just wondering if they were okay.”

She felt his hands on her shoulder and the pressure he put on them kept her from walking away. “You need to relax, Niijima-san. All this tension at a young age is only going to hurt you in the future.”

When a hand slid to the nape of her neck, she forced herself out of his grip. Her disgust must have shown on her face as he slightly bent over, a laugh beginning to form in the back of his throat.

“You’re afraid of me.”

Yes, she was afraid of him, and she was *alone* with him, with little to no one in the school, with no way out of the room. She told herself to remain calm and that her dad had taught her well (until he stopped training with her all together, but…she didn’t have time to think about that now) and she could defend herself if necessary.

But a character flaw she really needed to work on was saying stupid things when she was flustered. “You’re abusing your team.”

One: she had no proof. Two: there were only two people she could identify, so who's to say that they didn't get hurt at home or somewhere else? Three: he was a dangerous man, and she had just accused him of being violent.

He took one giant stride to stand directly in front of her, his eyes narrowing as he looked down on her like a small child he could crush in the palm of his hand. His lips curled into a sinister grin and she thought she was going to throw up. She tried to step away from him, but he quickly caught her chin between his thumb and his index finger and held on to her tightly.

"That's a serious accusation, Miss President." She would not let him see her fear, even as he closed the distance between them completely. She winced in pain as his grip on her face tightened. "But I'm afraid I can't let you leave here without showing you how much I don't tolerate lies."

There was a flash of something menacing in his eyes, but before he could make the first move, she did. She slammed her fist right below his breastplate, then thrust the heel of her palm into his chin. It wasn't enough to knock him off his feet, but it was enough of a distraction that she was able to get around him.

She didn't stop running until she was on a train to Kasumigaseki and standing in the lobby of the police station, frantically looking for her dad. A uniformed officer approached her cautiously and told her to sit down, then asked her if she could tell him what had happened.

"My dad…my dad…" was all she was able to say through her sharp intakes of breath. The confused officer tried to question her some more, but realized he was only making things worse and gave her some space.

She came enough to her senses that she was finally able to ask for a Lieutenant Sanada, to which the female secretary behind the front desk nodded her head and made a phone call. Makoto sat on the chair, trying to wait patiently, but a few seconds later, she pulled her feet onto the chair and rested her head on her knees.

Don't cry. Don't cry. Don't cry.

She could still feel Kamoshida's hands on her shoulders, her neck, his grip on her chin, the look of anger in his eyes before she attacked him. She felt so stupid thinking she could talk to him. She felt disgusted that she had shown weakness in front of someone who then exploited it. She hated that she was so afraid and weak and pathetic and…

She almost screamed when she felt another pair of hands on her shoulders. But instead of the intimidating glare of a man who wanted to harm her, she looked right into the concerned eyes of her father.

"Are you okay?"

Very rarely did she cry in front of him, but she did now. She couldn't stop herself. She hated him for a brief second when he didn't wrap his arms around her and offer her some kind of comfort. He instead draped an arm over her shoulder and helped her to her feet as he escorted her back into the station.

She didn't get a good look at the place her dad worked at before he led her into a room and closed the door. She stood where he left her, simply staring out into the space by the (his?) desk. A split second later, he came to kneel in front of her, holding her face between his hands.

"What happened? Are you okay?" He removed his jacket and tossed it over her. She held onto it tightly and tried to pretend he was holding her. "Makoto, what happened?"

She remained silent, even after he tried asking different questions. But never once did he put his arms around her and tell her he was there and everything would be okay. Never once did he tell her that daddy wouldn't let the bad guys hurt her. Never once did she feel like he was her *father* , but a nameless man in a suit and tie.

That character flaw came back full force as she removed herself from his grip and his jacket fell to the floor.

"I hate you."

She saw the look on his face and immediately threw a hand over her

mouth, but she didn't apologize. She tried not to get mad at him about the same issues Sae got mad at him for, but that didn't mean she felt any differently. There was always some small doubt in her heart that she *never* touched because same last name or not, he was her dad, by blood, and he was always good to her. She wouldn't have even cared if her parents had told her that her and her sister were adopted. She wouldn't think any less of him.

But the harder her feet hit the ground as she ran out of the building, the more she dived into that dark spot in her heart. She didn't care about why she had a different last name than either of her parents. She didn't care if her dad was a good detective and made a thousand enemies over his career. All she cared about was the fact he treated her like one of his victims rather than his own daughter. She didn't run to the police station to talk to a *policeman* ; she went to seek comfort from her *father* .

She hated him when his job took precedence over her or her sister. She hated him when he acted like a stranger to her in public. She hated him when he couldn't *love* her because he wanted to keep them safe.

Because a smart criminal with horrific intentions would stop at a lack of a paper trail…

No. They had lived together ever since she was born. He *knew* who she was. So why the hell did it even matter anymore? Why was he still so *afraid?* She would have thought that Sae walking out on him would have flipped a switch in his mind, but if anything, he proved to her today that nothing would ever change.

All Makoto managed to tell her mom that night was that she had told her dad that she hated him, and that she didn't know if she regretted it.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11

Sae was sixteen years old when he heard it for the first time.

I hate you!

Almost ten years later, Akihiko thought he had finally stitched up the wound.

I hate you.

He could still see the look in Makoto's eyes, could still *hear* the tone in her voice. She had been so terrified when he saw her, rocking back and forth on the chair in the lobby of the station. And what was priority number one? Make sure he didn't act like a *father* . To treat her like she had been some random person off the street coming in and asking him to help.

He punched the bag in front of him harder.

That was exactly why she said it. He didn't act like a father, but a stranger doing his job. However, he knew from his experience with Sae that hiding and acting like a kicked puppy wasn't going to solve anything. He gave her a day to relax, then he tried to talk to her.

He didn't know which outcome he liked better: Sae running out of his life for good or watching Makoto slowly retreat into herself in the days following her half-hearted apology. Both of their reactions did the same amount of damage and he started to wonder exactly how many more lives he had left.

It didn't make it any easier that he feared the next time he stopped by the apartment, Minako would throw divorce papers in his face and take Makoto and leave. He could at least be proud of the fact he was still checking in at least every other day, but quickly reminded himself that was what a good father should do *every* day.

Sometimes he wondered what he could do to piss this Kaneshiro off so he could send another round of men to kill him. At least he would go out fighting. Maybe. No one really needed to know the details. Maybe then Sae could forgive him, Makoto would stop regressing, and Minako could move on.

Shinji always told him that sometimes living was a greater punishment than death. He believed him now.

He attacked the bag in front of him with much more vigor, trying to stay focused and to stop jumping off cliffs into uncharted areas in his mind. He wanted to ask Makoto if she felt up to training with him, but one look at her told him she wasn't. She told him that she would go with him next time, hopefully, and it was good enough for him to leave without her.

"Damn, dude. The hell happened to you?"

He smacked his fist against the leather one last time before turning to a startled Ryuji. "Gotta stay in shape if you want me to take down bad-," He stopped when he realized there was something different about the boy. Bright as day. *Literally* bright as day. "What the hell did you do to your hair?"

He had been surprised to run into Ryuji outside of a normal training day, but that was quickly replaced with utter confusion. The teen simply threw his hands behind his head and shrugged his shoulders. "Just tryin' a new look. Pretty cool, huh?"

There was a grin on the boy's face, but Akihiko didn't know what to say. Was it cool? He wasn't sixteen, and even when he was, dying his hair was never on his to-do list. Strangely enough, it was a decent look on him, the blond complimenting his loud and rash behavior. He decided it would be wise not to tell him that.

"I don't know about cool, but, it fits."

Ryuji hissed out a "yes!" before he threw a fist into the air. "I'm a total badass now!"

Akihiko also didn't tell him that wasn't a *good* thing. "I didn't think I

was training you today."

The teen stared back at him for a minute, then shook his head. "Nah. Got somethin' else planned."

Ryuji took his previous stance, hands behind his head, another smirk plastered on his face. It was like he was challenging Akihiko to figure out what he wanted to do, but none of his thoughts were ones he wanted to entertain.

It wasn't until Ryuji did some kind of strange dance that he noticed.

"Your cast is gone."

The earlier smirk transformed into a full-blown smile. "Hell yeah! Doctor said I should probably stay off of it for a bit, but what do doctors know, right?"

He returned his attention to removing the bindings on his gloves. "While I'm happy for you, I would advise you not to push yourself too far if you want to avoid getting that cast put back on."

Ryuji ignored him. "C'mon, man! I got big plans today!" He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Bet I can run a mile with better times than you, old man."

Okay, he wasn't getting any *younger* , but he didn't need a rowdy teenager to remind him of that. "You have a broken leg. It wouldn't be fair."

"Yeah, sounds like somethin' an old man would say."

Akihiko pulled the gloves off his hands and shot a look to the boy. "I would hate to bruise your ego."

Ryuji hunched over towards him, his fist shaking in the air. "Ain't gonna do shit if you can't beat me!" Akihiko grinned at him, but then Ryuji straightened out his back and crossed his arms. "Well, I guess you're probably pretty tired. Beat the hell out of that bag, man. I shouldn't push you in case you were to have a stroke or something."

Akihiko might have been easily provoked back in the day, but he

learned to work on it. But he was having a *very* hard time ignoring Ryuji's jabs. "Fine." He came to face him fully. "I'll take your little bet."

Ryuji brightened up immediately. "Loser buys dinner at the beef bowl shop!"

Wonderful. He was looking for something to do later tonight anyway. Not only was he about to put Ryuji in his place, but he was going to get some free food. It wasn't quite the same kind of joy he would have felt had he been able to patch things up with Makoto, but he learned to take what was given to him.

"I hope you brought a lot of cash," he said as he walked side by side with Ryuji. "You're going to regret this."

Sure enough, ten minutes later, Ryuji sat on the floor of the gym by the treadmills with a sour look on his face. "I didn't think dudes over ninety could still run!"

Akihiko stood in front of him and chuckled, brushing off the insult. "And I thought you were a star athlete."

Ryuji reached out to punch his leg, which he effortlessly dodged, before forcing himself up to his feet. "Yeah, yeah. Once I'm fully recovered, I'll show you."

As much as he wanted to freeload off of Ryuji for a meal (he had been at the gym far longer than he thought), he thought it was unethical. He was the adult and Ryuji was still a child. Ryuji fought him for a minute or two, but they both said that when the "real" challenge happened, no one would get off so easy.

While the walk to the beef bowl shop had been done in silence, Ryuji became quite chatty once they sat down. For the most part, Ryuji told him he didn't do much besides sit and play video games all break, something he still continued to do once school had started again. Akihiko would have come down on him, but as he had a broken leg and there was very little the teen could do, he didn't. Plus, he was sure Ryuji would have been more active had he been able to run.

The boy asked about his job, if he had been fighting with any criminals again or getting stabbed again, if he made any super cool arrests over the past few weeks. His story didn't really change from the last time they spoke a week and a half ago, but for some reason, Ryuji seemed to enjoy listening to him. But with little to tell him, he changed the conversation back to him.

"How are you doing in school?"

Ryuji deadpanned. "Does it look like I want to be doing anything at school?"

He should have expected that reaction. "Are you going to be able to join the track team again?"

Ryuji stopped with his chopsticks dangling in mid-air. He was quiet for a long enough time that Akihiko was able to realize his answer. "I'm sorry, Sakamoto."

The teen placed his chopsticks on the holder beside his bowl, then slammed his fist into the table. "Even if I wanted to, the damn track team ain't even a thing now!"

Oh. "What do you mean?"

There was a scowl on his face as his fist tightened by his food. "Effin' Kamoshida! He broke the team up! Used me as an 'effin excuse! Got his volleyball club right as school let out. Everyone thinks cause he's an Olympic medalist and shit that he's cool! A lot of people signed up for practices over break while the track team got shoved out."

He really didn't want to broach the topic of Kamoshida again, seeing that he hadn't been able to do anything about the man other than anger him.

Then Ryuji spoke again. "A girl I know said her friend is a really good player, but she said she's been different since she started training under him."

That caught his attention. "Different how?"

Ryuji grabbed his utensils again and hovered over his bowl. “She’s super timid and reserved and shit.” He sighed. “I mean, I know her and she’s kinda quiet, but Ann swears that something’s going on.”

He literally felt his heart drop into his stomach. He knew Ryuji wasn’t talking about Makoto, since she wasn’t on the volleyball team, but that didn’t stop him from thinking it *was* her. Is that why she had been so distant these past few days, because Kamoshida had said something to her, or hurt her?

He pushed his chair back, startling Ryuji in the process. “I have to go.”

He placed enough money on the counter to pay for both of them, even if Ryuji tried to contest him, then grabbed his jacket and walked out of the building.

That was why Makoto ran to the police station. She had been at school that day, trying to help out some of the teachers and…

God he was an idiot.

Time seemed to be against him. He missed the train in Shibuya and was half-tempted to use the five-minute gap for the next train to run home. He couldn’t sit still, but he also knew it would take him more than five minutes to get home from the station. There was no other line that could take him to Ebisu without having to transfer somewhere else, so he was stuck. Stuck on a platform with his mind slowly tearing at his heart.

No wonder Makoto hated him.

But then something else caught his attention.

Shibuya was a very busy district, especially the time of night he was out in, but he saw hundreds and hundreds of people rush out from the subway station in a panic. The rest of the crowd on his platform peeked up from their phones at the noise. It didn’t take long for the news to reach his ears.

A train had derailed underground and crashed into the platform. He might have been able to hear the accident had he been in a clear

mindset and focused, but the Yamanote line was a bit of a walk to where the rumored crash had happened. He sure as hell could feel the apprehension mounting in the people around him with every passing second.

There was a sense of duty pulling at him, telling him that he was a cop, that he needed to go investigate, help the injured, get as many *facts* as he could before the press blew things out of proportion. But his feet remained planted on the concrete.

He wasn't going anywhere. He was going to take the train home. He would not let his job overshadow his own daughter again. She needed him, and he was going to be there for her.

The train finally pulled into the station, but many of the passengers on the platform hesitated to get on. He briefly worried that they would suspend service for the night and he would have been better off running home like he had originally planned. But, as luck would have it, the train took him to the next station without delay or accident, despite the palpable worry of his fellow riders.

His emotions were a mess. His daughter could have been hurt by some man he had tried *and failed* to get fired. There was a crime scene that he had walked away from. There was an angry teenage boy whom he had left sitting in a restaurant after bringing up said man who could have hurt his daughter.

The exhaustion finally reared its ugly face when he couldn't wait for the elevator and struggled to climb the ten flights of stairs to his floor. He almost broke the door down trying to get in. He was greeted by a horrified Minako and Makoto, both likely thinking he was some kind of intruder. He didn't give them a chance to recover before he threw his arms around his daughter's shoulders.

He tried to say he was sorry, or to ask her to validate his thought, but he couldn't. He just held her like he should have done the first time she walked into the police station and asked for him.

"What's wrong?" He was fairly sure Minako's first reaction had been to slap him for scaring the hell out of them, but he never acted like this. Even after his worst nightmares, his worst day at work, the

worst threat a criminal threw at him, he could manage to calm himself before either one of them had to worry.

“D-Dad?”

It was hard pulling away from Makoto, but he was afraid if he didn’t release her, he was going to crush her. Both her and her mother stared at him with wide eyes. He already overreacted once, so instead of reaching out for Makoto again, he walked to stand behind the couch and rested his hands on its back.

“I’m sorry.”

“This is very unlike you,” Minako said with a small hint of annoyance in her voice. “You almost broke the door down.”

Makoto, however, came to stand beside him. “Are you okay?”

If she had been some person he didn’t know who had suffered at the hands of Kamoshida, he could have spoken to her easily enough. But since she was his *daughter* , his fingers could only dig into the fabric of the couch because he didn’t know how to ask her. He didn’t *want* to know her answer *because* she was his daughter.

But he was tired of being a coward when he was afraid to face his children. Makoto needed him. And if that wasn’t enough, he chose to abandon Ryuji and a crowd full of injured and scared people to be here.

“Why did you come to me at the police station?” Makoto stepped away quickly, but Akihiko turned and reached for her arm. “Please, Makoto. Please tell me he didn’t hurt you.”

The second he noticed that she was trying to think of a way to avoid answering his question, the air rushed out of his lungs. Makoto seemed to pick up on his reaction and the tears began to line her eyes.

“I-I’m sorry…”

He was pretty sure he could pick up the couch with his one hand and throw it out the window, even if his muscles were *screaming* at

him from pushing himself a little too hard today. Minako came behind Makoto, who turned and dropped her head onto her mother's shoulders.

"What's going on?" Minako put her hands on her daughter and forced her to look at her. "Someone hurt you?"

He needed to calm down. He needed to focus on Makoto, not the growing rage building in his chest. He could pay a visit to Kamoshida later. He released his grip on the couch, took a deep breath, then lowered himself to a knee next to her.

She looked at him when he put a hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry I wasn't there for you, Makoto."

She bit her bottom lip in an effort not to cry any more than she already had, but he gave her a soft smile to tell her it was okay. That he wasn't going to let the bad guys hurt her. That he would protect her and keep her safe. "I won't let anything happen to you again."

It wasn't much longer until Makoto barreled into him, her arms wrapping tightly around his neck. She cried into his shoulder while he lifted his arms around her back. It had been too long since he had been able to hold his own child like this. It was nice, despite the circumstances, to feel like he was a father again. She might not have been five and crying over how mean her mother was being to her for not sharing her sweets, but she needed him, and for once, he was there.

Minako suddenly became frantic with worry and eyed him with concern. "What happened?"

Makoto wiped her face on his jacket before she turned to her mother, arms still clinging to him like a lifeline. "He just scared me is all."

Try as he might, he could feel his blood boil and his fingers weakly curled around her arm. Minako clearly didn't know what to make of anything as she began scanning the room with nervous energy. "Who? Who scared you?"

“One of the teachers.”

He could see that something clicked in Minako’s mind, her movements stilled and her lips parted. Her eyes found his, but he refused to look away. She drew her shoulders back with her inhale, then let it out in one slow motion. She said nothing and he didn’t know how to take her silence. Minako approached them and put her hand on Makoto’s head.

“Are you okay?”

He felt her nod against his shoulder as she began to calm down. She pulled back and lowered her gaze to his chest as she wiped a hand over her face. “I attacked him.”

Akihiko wanted to pat her on the back, to tell her something along the lines of, *“That’s my girl”* , but he didn’t think it was appropriate. “Did he attack you first?”

He was surprised when she shook her head. “He gave me a look and I got scared.”

“Why would one of the teachers attack you, Makoto?” Minako was starting to panic again, unable to sit still and paced around the room. “Why didn’t you say something to us before? Is this why you’ve been acting like this for so long? What kind of look did he give you that freaked you out enough to strike back?”

He understood Minako’s concern, but firing off a million questions with their daughter in the state she was in would only make Makoto more anxious. He lifted himself off the ground and placed his arm around Makoto’s shoulders. He led her to sit on the couch beside him.

“I don’t want you to be uncomfortable, Makoto, but I would like you to tell me what happened,” he said with a soft voice. Makoto hesitated for a moment, but she slowly nodded her head and turned to face him.

“I’m sorry I said I hated you.”

The arm he had around her shoulder carefully pulled her into his

chest, a mix of relief and sorrow rushing over him. He knew she didn't mean to say it when she told him she hated him (he had hoped anyway), but he also knew he deserved it. He kissed the top of her head. "I should have been there for you then." He ran his hand over her back and urged her on. "Please tell me what happened."

She told him that she had gone to speak with Kamoshida about a "school matter," that she felt trapped in his office and extremely uncomfortable, then she saw the flash of danger and she reacted off of instinct.

"Does this mean you're going to arrest me for assault?"

The air left his lungs in a quiet laughter. "Makoto, you defended yourself. If I'm going to arrest anyone, it's going to be him."

"But he didn't do anything wrong."

True. By law, he technically did nothing wrong. All Akihiko could really slap handcuffs on him for was intimidation, but since Ryuji's *assault* case had gone out the window, he didn't expect one about *intimidation* to hold up either.

But that sure as hell didn't mean he wasn't going to try and nail this son of a bitch to a cross and burn him alive. God only knows what Kamoshida would have done to her had she not reacted and found a way to walk out of the room.

Makoto was student number two, that he personally knew, that had fallen victim to Kamoshida. He doubted she would be the last, but he also worried that she wasn't the only one currently feeling threatened by him. Ryuij's words from earlier rang through his head. Student athletes were suffering under their coach, and he knew if he couldn't get that bastard out of the school, several others would suffer worse fates that he didn't want to think about.

He spent the majority of his life finding the heart to push on, to get stronger, to protect people. He had to stop him. He would be willing to put his job on the line if it meant keeping this man from hurting anyone else. Ryuji deserved justice. Makoto, and the other students,

deserved to go to school without the fear of Kamoshida harming them.

It was time to bring the big guy down off his high horse and into the dungeons.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12

For the first time since she was old enough to be excited about starting a new school year, Makoto was dreading it.

While the situation at home between her parents was stabilizing, Makoto started to regret telling her dad about Kamoshida's advance. He had been so angry, she could tell, but she thought it had passed with her initial statement. However, he never showed any aggression to her. He was actually very kind and warm and a wonderful father, even keeping the topic of her attack out of conversations she thought her mother had tried to start.

But she saw the rage when he didn't think she was looking. She knew her mom did too, and how she was able to keep him from killing someone, she would never know. Unless he *did* and her mom was helping him cover it up.

She knew he would never hurt her, or her mother, or her sister who needed a smack upside the head, but she did her best not to provoke him. Sadly, that meant spending less time with him. She did still go train with him once a week, but when he would ask her if she wanted to go out a second time, she used the excuse of studying for her mock entrance exams to kindly tell him no.

Outside of the one day a week she really spent time with her dad, she only went to school one day and *only* to tutor. She had to promise both her parents that she would stay far away from the teacher (she didn't think that her mother knew *who* it was) who frightened her, always be with someone, and have her phone with her at all times. She had been surprised when her dad took her to school one of those days, but while she was worried he would stay and "speak" to Kamoshida, he never did.

"If he comes after you again, don't hold back," he had told her, that angry aura beginning to build around him. She didn't say anything to him, but she nodded and hurried into the building.

However, the last week of spring vacation only made it that much harder to ignore Kamoshida's brutality.

Mishima had stopped showing up for her tutoring sessions when school had ended in March, but that didn't stop some of the players from meeting with her with open books and terrified expressions. Her comments usually ranged from academic to their injuries, to which some of them froze up and left while others tried to brush it off. Makoto thought she was able to get through to one of them, urged him to go to the police if he felt it necessary, then took one of her dad's business cards from her bag. She told him he specialized with youth when she handed it to him and he appeared to be put more at ease by her suggestion.

The young man thanked her quietly and put the card into one of his books before he closed it and placed it in his bag.

She didn't see the boy again until the first day of the new school year. She approached him and tried to ask how he was doing before he got nervous and walked away.

Her dad hadn't said anything to her about the player, so she assumed that he didn't even go. It was hard, but she had very little options at this point. Her dad was trying, she knew that, but she also knew that he needed more proof. She had hoped that with the card in hand, the teen would have gone to him. But, if he had, Makoto was sure she would have heard about it.

Regardless, she still felt useless. Her first day after class, she reached out to Mishima, who saw her from down the hall and scampered away. A few of the other players did the same, saying that they had practice and they didn't want to be late.

That was when she saw Ryuji by the second-floor stairwell. Maybe. He had blond hair, but she was *sure* that was him with that odd posture and non-conforming uniform.

"Um, excuse me, Sakamoto-kun?"

The boy looked up from his phone, noticed it was her, then lowered the device in his hand like he was annoyed. "Yeah?"

Having official confirmation, she didn't waste his time. "I would like to speak to you, if you have a moment."

The start of a scowl began to form on his face. "Why? Gonna start the year off by comin' down on me for being five minutes late?"

His hostility was slightly intimidating, but she moved past it. "No, actually. I would like to speak to you about…" She did a sweep of the hallway to make sure there were no other students around, then cupped a hand over her mouth. "Kamoshida."

She felt like a criminal whispering under her breath, but Ryuji's reaction was anything but covert. "You wanna *what?!"*

Makoto threw a finger over her lips and told him to be quiet. She looked around the hall again, but thankfully he hadn't been loud enough to bother any of the students gathered farther away. After a sigh, she spoke again. "Will you follow me up to the student council room?"

It took him a minute, but then he nodded and followed behind her. She didn't want to admit it, but once the door closed behind them and Ryuji took a seat, she was nervous. She had never spoken to Ryuji before, outside the occasional "stop being late for school" lecture. She really only knew him by reputation, someone who was a bad influence on others, got into fights, and tried to attack a teacher.

Speaking of… "I see that you're recovering."

Ryuji lifted his good leg and dropped his ankle on his other knee. "Yep. Too bad I can't go back to the track team now, can I?"

There was a cutting edge in his voice that made her tense. Was he blaming *her* for the track team's disbandment? But an excuse would just rub salt in his wounds, so she shook her head. "I've been noticing several volleyball players with various degrees of injury."

Ryuji dropped his leg and leaned back in his chair, draping an arm over the back. "Heard about some of them. Bastard is beatin' 'em. No other excuse."

While his comment helped to strengthen Makoto's resolve, it wasn't

the evidence she needed to take to her dad. “Do you know any of them?”

“Why do you care?”

The edge was back in his tone and it caught her off guard. “H-Huh?”

He didn’t hesitate. “Why do you care?”

A part of her wanted to tell him that she was terrified of Kamoshida, to tell him that he had cornered her one day, but she didn’t want to admit that to him. She doubted he would even believe her. “It’s my duty to look out for the well-being of the students. If Kamoshida is physically abusing them, then I need to do something.”

Ryuji’s eyes narrowed at her, but at least the coldness in the room disappeared. “Ain’t no one gonna come forward.”

“I need someone to talk to me, or to the police, or to someone they feel comfortable with so we can stop him.”

It was a moment of desperation trying to get through to the boy in front of her that she needed *something* besides scared teenagers running away from her. His face dropped and he exhaled loudly.

“Look Senpai, my case was thrown out. I know I ain’t a great student like you, but it had nothin’ to do with me being a bad example.” His eyes met hers and she felt the walls collapse around her. “No one wants to go to the police because nothin’ got done the first time. If it had been you, then he’d been arrested by now.”

Her hands balled into fists at her side. “Sakamoto-kun, I know you think that all I want to do is harp on you for being late and failing your tests, but what happened to you was uncalled for. You need to take what you’re feeling and talk to the other players. If enough of them come forward, then the cops can make a move.”

His head fell to his chest, his hands locked together in the space between his legs. “I can’t say it’ll work, Senpai. Most of ‘em don’t like me anyway.”

She took a deep breath, then told him, “I think you’d be surprised

what a common pain can do for communication."

He sat still for several more minutes before he pulled himself to his feet. "Alright. I'll at least try and talk to some of them." He walked past her to the door, but stopped right before he left. "Takamaki. You should talk to her friend. She's apparently gettin' it real bad."

Her heart clenched in her chest, but she nodded and watched him leave the room. She would try and get a hold of Takamaki tomorrow. It would be easier to talk to her rather than her friend, but Makoto knew that whatever Takamaki would tell her would only be hearsay. She needed the truth from her friend, and if her experiences thus far were any indicator, her friend wouldn't speak to her.

Maybe talking to a girl would be better. What teenage *boy* would admit to a girl that he was scared and hurt?

Just as she was locking up the student council room, she heard a voice call out to her. "Niijima-san, I would like to see you in my office."

The principal. She really didn't want to deal with him now, but she couldn't very well refuse. She followed behind him as they walked down the stairs and into the office, closing the door behind her. When she turned back around, her heart dropped.

"I understand you have an issue to report, Kamoshida-san?" the principal began as he took his seat.

When Kamoshida's eyes met hers, she swallowed hard to keep the bile in the back of her throat. "As a matter of fact, I do."

Makoto told herself to calm down. She hadn't done anything wrong. He couldn't bring a problem like digging for *facts* to the principal if he thought Ryuji couldn't bring a problem like *assault* . She was student council president, and if there was a school-wide problem, she would need to be kept in the loop. That's all this was. Typical day one meetings. It just happened to involve the man that frightened her.

Kamoshida kept his eyes narrowed, a twisted smile forming on his

lips. “I expected much better from you, Niijima-san.”

She saw her dad’s business card between his fingers and the terror took over. She bit the inside of her lip to keep from saying something stupid like last time, but she was sure he noticed her fear.

“I have a few students telling me that you’re asking people to go to the police and falsify reports.” He shook his head in mock disappointment. “Did he put you up to this?”

She had to say something at this point. “I told them to go to the police if their injuries were related to an abuse. I am still unaware of the source of their bruises and lacerations, but I only wanted to help them.”

“You think I’m abusing my players?” Her heart hammered painfully in her chest. “Because I find it hard to believe that one small accident with Sakamoto made you think that I would harm anyone.”

Makoto wanted to run, but the gravity in the room increased to the point she almost collapsed under the weight. It was *suffocating* . “I never said that.” Her father would be so upset if he saw her right now, trying to keep her shaking to a minimum while her voice sounded like she had screamed for days on end.

However, Kamoshida only chuckled at her. “I’ll ask you again.” The glare returned to his eyes. “Did *he* put you up to this?”

For emphasis, he threw the card at her, but she knew that if she ignored it, he would make the wrong assumptions. She reached down to pick it up, wishing her dad was there instead of his card. “He specializes in cases involving special victims, including teenagers.”

“How many other student council presidents have his card?”

Makoto doubted any of them did except those perhaps in Shinjuku, but she wasn’t about to tell him that. “I don’t think I’m the only one.”

Kamoshida sighed and hung his head, then he jumped to his feet and turned toward the principal. “This is harassment. I have nothing on my record indicating that I should even be under investigation,

and yet this piece of work thinks that just because I brought harm to a kid out of control with rage that I deserve to rot in a jail cell!"

That's exactly what you deserve .

Makoto began to feel her anxiety turn over into anger in the pit of her stomach. How dare he think that her dad was anything less than a great guy, and a great cop! How dare he think he did nothing wrong! How dare *he* be the one who was ranting and raving because it wasn't fair he was being *harassed* when students were being *assaulted* by him every day!

When Kamoshida turned to her, he had a look of shock in his eyes for a split second, likely surprised she would look *angry* instead of scared. She didn't back down and continued to glare at him, an expression she picked up on from watching Sis all the time. However, the second the surprise was gone, he narrowed his eyes.

"He'll pay for this."

And with that, Kamoshida stormed past her and out of the office, the door slamming shut loudly behind her. She stood still for a moment, her hands aching from keeping them in fists, but she needed time to relax. She couldn't step foot in the school hallways with a deadly aura about her. No one would ever speak to her again.

She took one last deep breath, expressed her apologies to the principal, then prepared to leave.

"Wait, Niijima-san." She closed her eyes and took another breath. Surely she wasn't about to hear it from the principal, too? "In unrelated news, I have a favor to ask of you."

Oh, good. A distraction. She nodded her head once. "Yes?"

The man leaned back in his seat, or rather, his head moved back against his shoulders. "We're getting a new student in a few days. I would like you to be here to introduce yourself and show him around the school when he arrives."

"Of course." A *perfect* distraction. "Do you know when he's due to arrive?"

Principal Kobayakawa shuffled through some of the papers on his desk. “I’ve scheduled a meeting with him on Sunday with his homeroom teacher. I’d like you to meet with him afterwards.”

Once Makoto had her Sunday figured out, she bowed politely, then left the office. Once she was out into the hallway, she pressed her back against the door. She was still pretty upset over Kamoshida’s threat against her father, but she didn’t think the man would actually try and harm a police officer. Plus, if he did try, not only could her dad take care of himself, but he had others who would pitch in to help him if he needed it. With that in mind, she let the worry leave her body with her breath.

Now to prep herself for a new arrival. She didn’t ask the principal for any details about the boy, or why he was staring a week late. It bothered her that she hadn’t even been in the right mindset to ask for more information, but it was too late now. She could ask tomorrow, or the next day, or just show up on Sunday and find out for herself and avoid talking to the principal all together.

She managed to make it home just as her mother was putting her plate on the table. “How was your first day of school as a senior?”

Her mom was often very cheerful when she got home if her dad hadn’t beaten her home first. Her eyes scanned the room for him, but she didn’t see his jacket on the couch or see him in the kitchen, so she assumed he was still at work. Realizing that she had yet to answer her mom, she placed her bag beside the nearest couch and came to stand behind her seat at the table.

“It was different.” She didn’t *lie* , but she didn’t tell her the whole truth. Her mother picked up on it immediately, something Makoto should have expected.

“Did anything happen?”

Makoto pulled her chair out and took a seat. “No, not really. I had a talk with the principal today.” She reached for her glass of water. “He told me that there’s going to be a new student starting Monday. He wants me to be there to meet him and show him around.”

Her mom took the seat across from her, her eyes glittering with amusement. “ *Him?”*

She sighed, thankful that she wasn’t asking what else she discussed with the principal or *who else* was in the office with her. “He didn’t show me a picture or anything. I don’t even know what year he is.”

Her mom continued to smile at her. “Age is only a number.”

As hard as she tried not to, she felt herself blushing. “Mom, stop it.”

“I met your dad when I transferred to a new school and he was a senior.”

Makoto almost, *almost* , said something snarky, but she kept the comment to herself. *And look at you two now.* “Anyway, I don’t know how long I’m going to be there, but I would assume he will have a lot to catch up on before he starts on Monday.”

Her mom chuckled at her and stood up to go back into the kitchen. “I really hope he’s cute.”

Makoto folded her arms across her lap. “He’s probably going to be ugly and annoying.”

“You put in the work and you’d be surprised the kind of man you can dig out.”

She didn’t bother figuring out what she meant by that.

When they both sat down a few minutes later with dinner on their plates, Makoto had to keep avoiding her mother’s gaze and fight to keep the heat from rising to her cheeks again. Why was she so interested in hooking her up with some guy that she didn’t even know? Just because the situation was strangely similar to her parents’ first meeting didn’t mean she was going to fall head over heels in love with this new transfer student. She had other things to think about besides boys, like getting into college and figuring out what she wanted to do with her life.

Both of them sat up straight when her mom’s phone went off. She walked off to answer it and Makoto took a deep breath to calm

herself down. Why was she getting so worked up anyway? Why was she so worked up about the fact she had nothing to be worked up about? Why was her mom being annoying about it?

“What?!”

Makoto’s knee slammed into the underside of the table at her mom’s shout. She rubbed the sore spot as she turned to her mother standing off in the living room. She looked shocked, but underneath that, she was angry. And it worried her.

Her mother quickly ended the call, but the phone remained tightly gripped in her hand. Makoto noticed the shaking in her arm and she would place a bet that if she was close enough, she would have heard the phone cracking in her palm.

“M-Mom? I-Is everything okay?”

She didn’t respond to her right away, but when she came to face her, Makoto could feel herself sink in her chair. “Your father.” Makoto’s heart rate picked up tenfold, her hand on her knee clutching the edge of her skirt.

“He’s been arrested.”

Chapter 13

Chapter 13

He knew he shouldn't have done it. Hell, even as he lifted his fist for another hit, he told himself he shouldn't do it. But he hit him again, and again, over and over until his men snapped out of their initial awe and wrestled him to the ground.

But he never regretted it. Not even when the bars to the holding cell slammed shut behind him.

"You can stay in there until you calm the fuck down, Sanada."

Oh, his superiors were going to *love* this.

Akihiko had been thrown into a jail cell a few times before, way back when he didn't know what Shinji was getting him into until someone grabbed him by the scruff of his shirt and hauled him away. He hadn't spent but a few hours in holding each time before the orphanage director, then eventually Mitsuru, came to get him out.

He hadn't been back since he was fifteen, shortly after Mitsuru had introduced herself and told him she needed someone with his strength. He also learned shortly after that shadows who lurked in the hidden hour of midnight didn't cry to police like some douchebag who had popped off to him and he slammed his fist into their face.

Thanks to his life with Minako and their kids, he learned to contain his impulsive urges to fight back. He struggled sometimes when he had to speak to men he had caught selling off scared underage girls in the alleyways of Kabukicho, but he never lashed out. It was hard when he busted drug dealers in the same alley, hearing them scream at him and tell him they would kill every single person he cared about if he didn't let them go, but he never retaliated.

The *second* Makoto's name came flying off of that Olympic schoolteacher's tongue, he snapped.

Akihiko didn't think much of his arrival into the police station at first, but he knew what the teacher was there for the moment he laid eyes on him.

"Getting all the pretty young girls in town to do your dirty work, eh, *Lieutenant?"*

A few of his men paused in their work at the tone in Kamoshida's voice, but Akihiko only shrugged his shoulders. "If you consider bringing people to justice for their crimes *dirty work* , then yes. I'll take all the help I can get."

Kamoshida took a few steps into the area, but one of the younger cops came to stand in front of him. "Do you have something you would like to report, sir?"

He would have to give this kid a raise just because of the reaction he pulled out of Kamoshida. The man literally turned bright red and huffed in anger. "That *bastard* over there is trying to harass me! I can't even do my damn job without one of his little snitches crawling up my ass!"

Akihiko smirked and approached the two of them. "Go ahead and take his statement, Takeshi. Harassment is a very serious crime."

With the right factors it could have been true, but he would have kept the sarcasm out of his tone had he been speaking to anyone other than Kamoshida. Members of his team began to smile and chuckle around him. The young cop only added to the rage building inside Kamoshida when he grinned and nodded his head.

"Right away, sir."

He turned to walk away, but then Kamoshida started turning things on its heel. "I figured a tough piece of work like you would have an equally tough piece of ass waiting for you at home." He refused to turn around and give the man the satisfaction of knowing that he had struck a chord. However, the comment was enough to get him to stop, which was all the indication Kamoshida needed to keep going.

"So tell me why someone your age is sniffing around Shujin looking

for a younger girl?"

He took a deep breath before he spun around, the earlier humor in the room fading instantly. "Oh, I'm not interested in the students so much as I am their safety."

A smile stretched across the man's face and he felt something cold drop into his stomach. "That's wonderful. Because you know…" He dared to take a few steps towards Akihiko, like *he* was the one in command and this was *his* home. "That beautiful student council president and I are really starting to hit it off." Kamoshida stopped a few steps in front of him. It took every ounce of strength he had not to reach out and *strangle* him.

"She turns eighteen at the end of the month." Then, he leaned in and whispered, "And I can't wait to show her just how much I *love* her, if you catch my drift."

Oh he caught it alright, but Akihiko reminded himself that he was just trying to get a rise out of him. He was doing a damn good job, but he wouldn't let him know that. "Sounds like you're planning a crime there."

Kamoshida had the *gall* to laugh. "No, no, not a crime! She's everything a man like myself could ever want! I've been stricken by Cupid's arrow." Now he was just making a scene. His men didn't find it entertaining. Neither did he.

Another cop came up behind Kamoshida and grabbed his wrist. "Come on now. If you're not here to report a crime, you're going to have to leave."

"Sorry, sorry. One last question." Akihiko could feel his knuckles burning from the tension as he clenched his hands into fists, but he locked eyes with Kamoshida and braced himself for whatever question the man was going to ask. Kamoshida kept his voice low and quiet as he leaned into his personal space with that damn grin he wanted to beat off his face.

"I prefer the innocent girls, you know? So, you wouldn't happen to know, given your odd relationship, if Makoto is still a virgin, would

you?”

His first punch was a left hook across the side of his face. So was the second. At some point, Akihiko managed to grab the collar of his shirt and throw him against a wall before his fist found that sweet spot under his ribs. He didn’t know how many shots he got into his face, his chest, his stomach, but each one was full force, unrelenting, and aimed to *kill* .

It actually took five uniformed officers to pull him off of Kamoshida. He was still in so much of a rage that he fought against them, shaking one off of his arm before another grabbed on to him. It wasn’t until one of the officers got a good grip on his wrist and pulled his arm behind him that he became more aware of his surroundings. He felt another kick at the back of his knees, forcing him off of his feet and onto the floor.

The coolness of the tiled floor in contrast with the boiling heat of his skin fully brought him to his senses. Once he stopped trying to fight people off of him on the ground, he realized someone had handcuffed his hands behind his back. Smart. His hands were his only weapons for *years* . Take them away and he was pretty much done.

He was helped to his feet by two others, then promptly thrown into the holding cell. He didn’t notice until now that he still had the cuffs on his wrists. Again, something he was grateful for, or he would have sent both of his hands through the concrete walls until he managed to clear a path so he could continue *killing* Kamoshida.

Unfortunately, as his rage began to recede, he had to face the reality of what he had done. He had assaulted someone in front of a group of peers, *cops* , and Kamoshida had been smart about it. The comment that sent him off the deep end had been whispered to him, so the damn teacher could easily lie about what he had said. Even still, one comment should never incite that level of violence, especially from a *cop* .

But he sure as hell didn’t regret it. He wondered exactly how bad he had hurt him. Hopefully bad enough to put him in a coma for the rest of his life. He would gladly go down for attempted murder, or even

murder, if he took that…that *deviant* off the face of the planet!

He smacked his head back on the wall, squeezing his eyes shut and tried to forget the way Kamoshida looked at him while he made sexual suggestions about his *daughter* . His little girl. The child who always greeted him at the door with a bright smile and little arms in the air, begging to be held. Who always wanted him to tuck her in at night. Who would always cling to him during story time and tell him that she never wanted him to leave and he would have to stay with her until she had fallen asleep and her small hand finally relaxed enough around his shirt that he could move without waking her up…

He threw his head down to his chest. His eyes burned worse than his blood-covered knuckles. He was breathing harder now than when he had tried to take another man's life. He grit his teeth, tried to think of *something* that would get the disgusting images out of his head before he started screaming. Angry tears spilled over onto his face while he twisted his hands behind his back, thinking that he could work his way out of the handcuffs if he pulled at them hard enough. He didn't stop trying to free himself, even when he felt the trickle of blood on his wrist drip down into his gloves.

Nothing helped. If Kamoshida wasn't dead or dying, he was going to go after Makoto the second he could. And while he was locked in a jail cell, there would be no one to help her. *No one.* And he sure as hell wasn't going to stand for that.

He had no idea how long he struggled against his restraints, how long he fought back nauseating images of Kamoshida with his daughter, but he eventually heard the click of the lock to the cell.

"I never thought there would be a day I would see you behind bars."

He sure as hell wasn't prepared to see Sae at the moment.

She folded her arms as the wind rushed out of his lungs like he had been hit by one of his own earlier punches. "Tell me, how did a man sworn to uphold the law come to nearly end another man's life over a few words?"

He could feel the anger brewing within him again. "Don't."

Sae was quiet long enough that he shifted his head to look at her. She was talking to one of the cops on duty (third shift officer, if he was seeing things correctly) who came into the cell and pulled him to his feet. He didn't uncuff him and he held his upper arm as he followed behind Sae. She was likely headed to an interrogation room to ask him what the *fuck* had happened. And he would tell her, because he knew that while Sae may never love him again, she loved her sister.

"You can't seriously be *arresting* him?" One of the third shift cops stood and blocked her way, arms out to further emphasize his disapproval. "He's a good guy, a good *cop!* He wouldn't have acted out that way without a reason!"

The notion was touching, but Sae lifted her hand to silence the officer. "With or without a reason, he still beat a man within an inch of his life. By law, that's assault. The courts are going to deal with the specifics of the nature of this crime from here on out."

Akihiko muttered to the young man to keep doing his job before he was ushered out into the cool April evening air. It felt nice, to be honest, getting some fresh air and cooling off after spending however many hours steaming with *rage* . He expected Sae to slam his head into the roof of a cop car, to have her toss him into a *real* prison cell and throw out the key.

What he *didn't* expect was for her to tell the officer to release him.

He was going to ask her what she was doing when she grabbed the middle of his tie and literally yanked on him until he almost fell over. "I have enough on my plate right now with the mental shutdown case that I don't have time to deal with you and your aggressive attitude." He opened his mouth, but Sae silenced him with another tug. "I did this for Mom and for Makoto, but so help me if you do *anything* like this again, I'll see to it you're thrown in jail next to the worst criminal locked up in Japan."

She released him and began to walk off, but he grabbed her arm before she got two steps away. "Sae, that man wants to do more than hurt your sister. I've tried once to bring him into custody, but I couldn't make the arrest. And I've had to live with the fact that he

could be out there hurting other people for months now. But when your sister came to me and told me she was scared of him, I felt like I had failed her."

He paused only to take a deep breath. "The things he said to me today…if I can't get this man out of the school, he's going to follow through on everything. And I may have failed my duty as a cop not being able to get him thrown in jail the first time, but I will *not* fail my duty as a father. If he comes within fifty meters of her, I won't hesitate to kill him."

Akihiko felt like he had gotten through to Sae. He dropped her arm as she stood still, staring down at the steps in front of her. She brought a hand to her head and sighed. "You can't say things like that to someone who can have you arrested again."

"Then you're going to have to arrest me." She lifted her chin and met his eyes, a look of sorrow flashing over her face. "I won't go out of my way to harm him, but if I see him close enough to your sister, I'll do more than harm him." His hands tightened at his side. "I won't let him hurt her."

The sorrow in her eyes remained for a second later, then it faded away. In its place, dormant anger surfaced and he knew it was back to the same old argument. "I'm glad Makoto means that much to you that you're willing to put your job and your life on the line to protect her."

She turned sharply enough that the end of her hair (when did it get so *long?*) cracked in the air like a whip. "Sae, wait." He didn't waste time breathing when she actually listened to him. "I would hope that you would know that if you felt you were in danger, you could tell me, and I would do everything I could to keep you safe."

Her eyes continued to burn holes into him, but a terrifying smirk played across her lips. "No you wouldn't."

It was a powerful enough admission that it froze him on the steps as he watched her walk off into the shadows of the night.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14

Ren didn't know what to expect when he arrived in Tokyo, but it sure wasn't *that* thing.

He thought he would get lost, be intimidated by the crowds, take the wrong trains, stuff a country boy would do when they arrived in a city the size of Tokyo for the first time, *alone* . And he *did* get lost in the station trying to find his connection, which is why he had left the building because he wanted some fresh air to help cope with the fearful anxiety consuming him.

But then the flames of hell took that first breath right out of his lungs.

His phone in his hand cracked under his grip, but he was oddly curious about what was happening. He heard people talk about what it was like to have their life flash before their eyes before death, and for a second, he thought that was what was happening. It scared him initially, watching the fast pace of the commuters around him slowly still until they stopped all together. His eyes widened when the flames came to life, but the longer he stared at it, the more he began to wonder *why* he was seeing it.

Then came the eyes and the smile that stretched from one side of the flame to the other. He should have been more terrified, but even so, he kept his gaze on the phantom figure, unable to look away. He found himself taking a step forward, the mysterious being pulling him in with some odd power. However, when he was able to lift one of his feet and take that step, the blue flame disappeared and the people around him sprung back to life.

Ren stood in the middle of the congestion, staring out at where the *thing* had been. No one else seemed to mind, or they didn't see it, so he assumed it was all his imagination. The harder he shook his head to clear the image, the more questions came to his mind. Knowing he wasn't going to get the answers now, if ever, he breathed out a sigh and went back to his original mission of finding

his connection.

He went to pull up the maps on his phone, thinking somehow that would help him, when he saw it. The black and red eye looking app had rudely installed itself on his phone. His curiosity was quickly replaced with fury. He had been forcibly kicked out of his home for *helping* someone who, in turn, didn't help him. He was charged with *assault* when the man who accused him had been the *real* criminal. Now, he had someone chaining him to a strict schedule and constantly breathing down his neck. His parents shipped him off without a single goodbye to a city he had never been to, much less knew how to get around. He was alone, in a city with millions and millions of people, and now someone thought to frustrate him even more by downloading a virus onto the one thing keeping him together.

He immediately deleted it, hoping that *one thing* would go right for him and it would have just been a strange malfunction. When he didn't notice any odd technological issue and the app didn't show back up, he thought he was in the clear, at least for now.

An hour later, he was standing outside Yongen-Jaya station, ready to take on the last leg of his journey. The first thing he noticed was the cop, standing by a store, his head turning ever so slightly as he scanned the neighborhood. Ren froze in his spot, terrified that he had been set up, that everyone back home made him believe he was going to be "free" by serving out a probation period when in fact, he was going to get thrown in jail all along. He could see them all laughing at him, his hands back in cuffs and in the back of a police cruiser, all of them lining up as they paraded him through the small town like the fool he was…

Ren didn't make eye contact with him when the officer's eyes landed on him, but he still couldn't move. He was sure he looked even more suspicious, standing completely still and forcibly looking at something *other* than a cop.

Which is why he wasn't surprised when the man approached him. "You lost, kid?"

He felt a rush of relief that he didn't slap handcuffs on him and

nodded his head. “I-I’m trying to find a…” He pulled out a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket. “A Sojiro Sakura?”

Even though the cop directed him to where the man lived, Ren could still feel his eyes on him as he made his way down the road. The good news was that no one else seemed to be bothered by him. He wondered which type of person Sakura-san would be; the one who minded his own business, or the one who would hound him if he so much as *breathed* wrong.

He was extremely disappointed when no one was home. The delivery man was kind enough to tell him that Sakura-san owned a business just down the street, so he made that his next stop. His eyes found the cop again, standing in the same spot as before, continuing to scan the crowds. This time, Ren didn’t stop and bring attention to himself and made his way to the coffee shop a few blocks away.

He didn’t think Sakura-san would have been happy to see him since he was fully aware of his criminal status, but he didn’t think someone who would have let him into his home for a year would be so *cold* .

Ren bowed to him, thanked him for being willing to house him, but the newspaper in the older man’s hand slapped the table with enough force that Ren jumped in his place.

“I forgot you were coming today.”

He watched him sigh deeply, as if Ren had ruined his mood by showing up, then dropped his half-lit cigarette into the ashtray. “You’re staying upstairs.”

It surprised him, but then he asked himself, why would a stranger want a *criminal* living with them? He should be grateful the man was even giving him a roof over his head. So he said nothing and followed him up the narrow stairs to the second floor of the café.

He felt his heart drop into his stomach when he saw the room that he would call “home” for the year. “It’s up to you to clean up.”

Before Ren could come to terms with being holed up in an attic

space, Sakura-san jabbed a finger into his chest. “If you steal *anything* from me, I’ll throw your ass out so fast your head will spin.” He poked him again. “You have nowhere else to go, so don’t screw this up. Understand?”

The man then huffed and stormed down the stairs like Ren had insulted him. And maybe he had, since he was a business owner and he walked into the store with customers around. At least, he hoped that’s why he was pissed at him.

Instead of falling onto the tiny mattress on top of milk crates that he was *so* eager to sleep on, he looked around his new living space and told himself it would be okay. It wasn’t a jail cell. If he kept to himself, Sakura-san would keep to himself (hopefully) and the year would go by in no time. He could do this. He would make it. He *had* to make it, because regardless of how Sakura-san said it, he *didn’t* have anywhere else to go.

The tears stung his eyes, but he refused to break down now. The hardest part was over. Now he just had to tidy the place up a bit and call it a day. He was tired and would have slept on the creaky and dusty floorboards if he didn’t get a mattress, but he dug through the attic for a broom and got to work.

He was so exhausted by the end of the day that he didn’t even mind the fact that he could feel the edges of the crates through his bed.

However, he scrambled awake, reeling in a cold sweat, his scream caught in the back of his throat, when he thought he was back in a prison cell. The more he recalled the details, the more he realized that it was just a dream. People didn’t have noses that long in real life. Two children couldn’t get the title of warden. It was a *dream* , but he couldn’t force himself to go back to sleep.

Sakura-san didn’t seem to lose the edge in his tone the next morning either, but he was kind enough to drive him to school for his orientation. While Ren sat in the passenger seat with his mouth closed, his eyes took in the buildings around him. He knew Tokyo was big, but being inside the city helped him understand just how *big* it was. Buildings stretched on for kilometers, out of sight from his spot in the car, while more and more came into view beside them.

People congregated at crosswalks every intersection and there was never a moment of peace. It was hard to wrap his head around, being from the country, but it was all incredibly *fascinating.*

Sakura-san parked his car on the street and didn't bother to tell him they had arrived. Ren continued to eye the buildings in child-like wonder until the older man knocked on his window. The man said nothing, just gave him a stern look as he got out of the car feeling like an idiot.

The school itself was a typical school, boring and bland on the outside, boring and bland on the inside. There were a few students roaming the halls, even on a Sunday, but he noticed most of them had on windbreakers and bandages. One young man even had half of his head covered up with white athletic tape. Ren decided it was best if he kept his eyes on the floor in front of him from then on, trying not to gain a reputation of a nosy transfer student on day one.

As soon as Sakura-san opened the door to the office, Ren saw two people in front of him: one oddly proportionate man behind a desk that he presumed to be the principal, then a relatively young-looking woman standing off to the side with a scowl on her face. He stood straighter when he heard Sakura-san step beside him, then he bowed to the two people.

He was correct in his assumption of the principal, and the young lady introduced herself as his homeroom teacher. Again, she too didn't seem thrilled to be dealing with him, and a part of Ren began to worry if he was even going to fit in here. He didn't want people to be *coddling* him, but a polite smile would have sufficed. It was like the attitude of those back home had been put into a box and sent out to every person in Tokyo he would have to come in contact with.

He tried not to let it bother him, but when the principal also warned him that one mistake would put him out on the streets or back into juvenile detention, he dropped his head. His thoughts began to get the better of him, cursing himself for being out and about that night, slapping himself in the face for even bothering to help that woman, pissed that his own *family* didn't want to help him.

"We're giving you a chance, so don't you screw this up."

“Why did it have to be me?”

“I have a store to get back to.”

Ren wasn’t a big complainer, but god *damn* was he tired of listening to everyone bitch and moan about how *one student* was *ruining* their life! Sakura-san didn’t have to offer a place for him to stay. The school didn’t have to accept the request for his transfer. But they did. All for what? So they could remind him of his place? Is this the kind of rehabilitation his parents thought would make him *not* be violent again?

He blinked and Sakura-san and Kawakami-sensei had left, leaving him standing in the office with just the principal. He panicked, thinking Sakura-san was going to make him find his own way home when he didn’t even know where he *was* . The principal coughed and Ren turned to him, thinking he was going to reprimand him for just being in the room.

“I’ve asked Niijima-san to show you around the school. If you have any questions, you can direct them to her.”

Ren did his best to exhale his disappointment without attracting attention. One more person to be cold to him. One more person to hold a grudge against him for being where he was forced to be. One more pair of eyes that would give him a once over and kick him to the curb without knowing the *first* thing about him.

The door opened and Ren’s curiosity got the better of him. He was surprised that this Niijima-san was a student, her uniform the all-telling sign. The first thing he really noticed about her were her eyes, a piercing dark crimson that burned him to his soul, even if she wasn’t glaring at him. Her face was expressionless, but she at least bowed to him as she introduced herself.

“I’m the student council president, Makoto Niijima.”

He followed suit. “Ren Amamiya.”

She gave one nod to the principal, saying nothing to the man as she slid the door open for him to walk through. He got the vibe from her

that she wasn't much of a talker, and he may have made some judgments about her since she was the student council president. But, being judged himself, incorrectly he might add, made him keep an open mind. She might not have smiled at him, but so far, she was the most polite out of the group he'd met in Tokyo.

For the most part, she kept her comments to the tour itself, but she did pick up on him scanning around the halls in his search of Sakura-san. "Is something the matter?"

Ren turned his eyes to her, slightly embarrassed at being caught and appearing inattentive. He shook his head, choosing to stay quiet, then followed behind her as she continued to show him around. There came a point where she paused and her shoulders stiffened when they both stood outside the gym, but no sooner did he notice it, it was gone.

They concluded the tour by the main entrance. He wanted to ask her a question, just so he didn't feel like he wasted a good thirty minutes of her day, but the only thing that came to his mind was, "Is there something wrong with the gym?"

She gave him a bewildered look (which he thought was super cute), but then her face blanched and he felt like he had a knife in his stomach. Instead of answering his question, she shook her head and dropped her eyes to the floor, her tone much more hushed and nervous. "Is there anything else you needed?"

Knowing he had crossed a line into her privacy, he apologized for his question and thanked her for her time. He waited a few more seconds in hopes that she would *look* better, but the guilt started to weigh on him, so he wished her a good day instead.

The first person who seemed nice enough to talk to and he had to go and throw himself head-first into her personal life.

Angry with himself, he leaned up against the side of the walls outside the school gate. Was Sakura-san coming back for him? Did he need to let the man know he was done? He couldn't *really* expect Ren to find his own way home without ever stepping foot into Tokyo's subway stations before…could he?

Ren eventually came to the conclusion that he was stranded. He didn't have Sakura-san's number in his phone. He was going to have to walk to the next station and ask someone for help. And why not? Why not see how much more pathetic he could make himself feel getting lost on his way home and missing his curfew and having that lone cop recognize him and arrest him for violating his probation on day *one* ?

"Did you need something?"

He thanked his quick reflexes for managing to catch his phone before he dropped it. He turned to his left and saw Niijima-san giving him a curious look. How long had he been standing out there?

"I'm waiting for my…for Sakura-san to come pick me up." He didn't want to tell her that Sakura-san was his *guardian* in case she wanted to fish for more details since he had been rude and dived into *her* life.

"Oh." There was surprise in her voice and Ren felt his heart plummet into his stomach. "I was under the impression he wasn't coming back."

Well, wonderful. How the hell was he going to get home now? He knew it probably wouldn't be too difficult if he asked the right people, but he sure as hell couldn't ask *her* . He was already beginning to feel terrible again for intruding earlier, so he didn't want to bother her any more than he already had. Surely she had a family to get back to on a Sunday afternoon…

"You're not from the big city."

It wasn't a question, but a statement, and one that startled him. "Um, no, I'm not." He couldn't be rude to her after she had been nice enough to take time out of her day to show him around the school, but he was still reminding himself to be cautious. He didn't know her, what she planned to do with the information he gave her, so he needed to keep their conversations brief.

"Do you need help getting home?"

There wasn't a smile on her face, but something about her expression made him feel comfortable instead of rejected. Given the past few months of his life, he welcomed the change. Regardless of her motives, he found himself giving her a soft smile.

"I don't want to trouble you."

Not what he wanted to say, but it was probably for the best. He really didn't want to keep her any longer. She had already done enough for him for one day. She gave him a small trace of hope that maybe things wouldn't be so bad while he was in Tokyo. It was nice. And that was good enough for now.

But his breath caught in his throat when he saw a smile come to her face and her eyes had a tiny glint to them. "I don't mind. The subway lines can be hectic to someone who doesn't know what to look for."

Yeah, she was really cute when she smiled.

"Where are you headed?"

Ren told her he was living outside of Yongen-Jaya, to which she fumbled around on her phone and found the directions for him. He felt like an idiot for not doing it himself, but he also told himself that he wasn't in the best state of mind. Plus, Sakura-san never *told* him he wasn't coming back for him…

When she giggled and showed him there was an app he could download, he fought to keep the blush from reaching skin she could see. "Oh, thank you," he sputtered out, thankfully keeping his voice steady. He lifted his own phone and went to download the app, but then discovered that same creepy one from yesterday had installed itself again.

It annoyed him, but he wouldn't let it show. He would take care of it when he got back to the shop and hopefully keep it off his phone for good.

Her voice brought him out of his thoughts. "It seems you have to go to Shibuya as well." She reached for the strap of her bag around her shoulder. "I can show you the way if you'd like."

Another genuine smile came to his face as he nodded and walked beside her. She pointed out a few things along the way, places to avoid, where trouble liked to start, where students like to meet outside of school, but he was too drawn into the tone in her voice that he didn't really listen to her *words* .

"You're a second year, correct?"

The bright and cheerful nature of possibly making a new friend burst like shattered glass. If she knew he was a second year, did she look at his file? Did she know he was sent here for a probationary sentence? Did she know he was a *criminal?*

There was no way. She wouldn't be walking next to him and showing him the way home since he had been abandoned if she knew he was a criminal. Unless…no, she didn't strike him as someone who was vindictive and plotting something the second they reached the station. But while he told himself not to assume she was *bad* , he told himself not to assume she was *good* either.

"I am."

He felt bad the next second, his tone coming across more cutting and cold than he wanted it to. She clearly took it that way, as she lost her smile and studied the area in front of her, her hand tightening around her bag.

"I'm sorry."

Why was she sorry? She was the one who was going out of her way to make him comfortable in a new city, and he was taking her generosity for granted. "No," he said as he came to a halt. "I didn't mean to sound rude."

Sadly, the rest of their walk to the station was done in silence. There were quite a few people on the platform headed to Shibuya, more than he'd ever want to be around. Trying to break the ice again, he coughed into his hand and looked over at her.

"So, what time should I be at the first station?"

Her head popped up as she realized he was talking to her, then she

turned to address him. “I’m not familiar with your line to get home, so I wouldn’t be able to tell you a specific time. However, Shibuya can be very busy in the mornings, so I would suggest you arrive no later than seven if you wish to make it to school on time.”

He wanted to ask her to elaborate on “busy”, but the approaching train cut him off. He stepped into the car after her and stood beside her. He had never been on a subway train before (odd, but the trains back home were all above ground and ancient), so he gave into his curiosity and looked around. From the extremely quiet nature of the riders to the swaying of the train as it rounded a corner to the LED screen above his head, he felt like he was an excited child. He tried to contain his amusement so Niijima-san wouldn’t get annoyed with him.

But it was fun. He hadn’t had a lot of chances to have fun in the last few months.

They reached Shibuya and he felt the excitement leave with his breath. Not only did he have to get off the train, he was going to have to part ways with Niijima-san and go back to the gruff and stiff attitude of Sakura-san. The girl next to him told him he had to remember to take the Ginza line to and from school, then he followed her through the exit gates and towards a subway map.

He had to admit that when he saw it, he was intimidated.

“I know it looks complicated, but once you have your destination in mind, it’s actually fairly simple.” She was relaxed again, something he was happy about. “Once you’re off the platform, the signs above you can usually lead you to where you need to go with little confusion.”

“Thank you, Niijima-san.” He added a light bow, even if a part of him didn’t want to have to leave. He sounded pathetic for the thought, but he made a friend. Maybe. When was the last time he felt like this around anyone else?

“Do you need me to show you to your next line?”

He was touched by the gesture, but it was getting late in the

afternoon. He already felt bad for taking up so much of her free time, so he kindly denied the request and bowed to her one more time. “I really do appreciate you taking the time to show me around today.”

She waved him off. “It was my pleasure.” She hoisted her bag up higher on her shoulder. “It was nice to meet you, Amamiya-kun. If you have any questions or problems, feel free to talk to me.”

A warmth spread in his chest and out into his smile. “I will. Have a good night, Niijima-san.”

She smiled and turned to walk to whatever connection or destination she was headed to. However, she stopped after taking a few steps and slowly came to face him again. The look on her face made him stop breathing, worried that she was going to tell him some horrible story or she would tell him that she didn’t want to talk to him anymore because she *knew* he was a criminal…

“I know we just met, but…will you promise me something?”

Her voice was so fragile and quiet that he had a strong urge to walk up and hug her. He didn’t, but he had to plant his feet into the ground to keep himself still.

“Earlier, you asked me if something was wrong with the gym. Well…” Her eyes met his, their red coming to life like there was a fire burning in her soul. It was captivating enough that he literally forgot to breathe.

“Stay away from Kamoshida.”

Chapter 15

Chapter 15

Minako was beginning to worry she was losing her mind.

When she was in high school spending her evenings climbing up a demented tower, she had it all together. She knew how to deal with Junpei's cries for attention, which oftentimes meant he would charge into a fight they weren't ready for. She knew how to deal with the incessant bickering back and forth between Akihiko and Shinjiro, which often required a simple look to the former and a slap upside the head for the other. She knew how to organize her team based on a variety of factors, come out with a victory, then make sure they were all okay for school the next morning.

She was often proud of herself for pulling everything off back then. So where in the time span of then till *now* did she lose her ability to keep things together?

She hadn't seen much of Sae since she told her to leave the previous Christmas Eve.

She couldn't keep Makoto's fears from surfacing every time she walked out the door to go to school.

Akihiko was…well, she stopped trying to figure out what was happening with him.

She blamed herself. She knew he had been upset with her spending time with Sae when that was all he had ever wanted. She knew he wasn't going to heal overnight, over a week, or maybe even a month. But it wasn't until she got so upset, so angry with him for running away time and time again, that she felt something *change* between the two of them.

She threatened him with a divorce. It was a horrible thing to use against him and it had been evident on his face that night. Makoto had stormed off to her room. Akihiko left as soon as he had spoken

to their daughter. She sat on the couch in the darkness, telling herself over and over that she didn't deserve her family, and almost packed her things and went back to Iwatodai.

But she thought she could patch things up like she had done so many times in the past.

Makoto was at least coming around and opening back up to her. Makoto occasionally asked if she was seriously going to leave her dad, but she always assured her that they would work something out. They always did. Even if the threat was never vocally made to separate, she knew he knew she thought about it.

Akihiko was more complicated. However, she understood that he was scared of her finally giving up on him. But how was she going to tell him she wouldn't leave if she never saw him? The few times he had braved coming home, it would be late in the night. He would check in on Makoto, make sure he had a bag ready to leave the next day, then he would always sleep on the couch and be gone before she woke up.

When she got the phone call from Mitsuru that he had been arrested, she knew she had to have a talk with him.

The look on his face when he came home that night had crushed her. He said nothing to her as he walked up to Makoto and roughly pulled her into him. Makoto had been clearly shocked by the sudden outburst, but it wasn't until Minako noticed his tears that her heart broke in half.

She could count on one hand how many times Akihiko had cried in their time together. The first being when Shinji died. He didn't really *cry* as much as he shed a few tears for a friend, the final connection to his past slipping through his fingers and out of his reach forever. She had sat next to him in his silence, but in that moment of weakness (that's what he called it later on), she refused to leave him.

The second time was at their wedding ceremony, when he had choked on his tears telling her " *I love you"* and he shook his head to try and cover it up. She couldn't help the breathless laugh that made

her smile stretch to the point it hurt. He smiled back at her, squeezed the hand he held between both of his, and she knew he would love her forever.

The third and final time had been when Sae told him she never wanted to see him again and never came back home. For the longest time, Minako worried he was going to do something stupid, that he was going to assign himself the most dangerous case he could get his hands on and run out and get himself killed. Or, her biggest fear, was that he was going to get called to a crime, be in the depressed state he had been in, not pay attention, and get killed that way. But he came home every single night for weeks after Sae had left, until that first December Sunday when he sat up in bed, threw his hands to his face, and cried.

This, however, *this* was different. Through the anger, the love, the sorrow, he always pushed through to be a better man. But she never saw him like this…He was *sobbing* , holding onto Makoto like she was the only thing keeping him alive. It brought tears to her eyes, to her daughter's eyes, and she had no clue as to how to help him calm down.

There was a switch in him shortly after he was able to put some distance between himself and Makoto. With tears still on his face, he gripped both of her shoulders firmly and started to shake her.

"Don't you *ever* get stuck alone with him. *Ever* . *Promise me!* "

Minako actually had to pull Akihiko off of Makoto when she noticed his grip tightening and the fear coming to Makoto's face. Although Makoto protested, she sent her to bed (it was pretty late). When the door to her room closed, Minako turned back to Akihiko, but her voice was caught in the back of her throat. Without a word, he sat himself down on the couch, threw his hands into his hair, and worked on calming himself down.

She didn't sit beside him and just stood like a fool, desperate to know what had happened, what he had done to get arrested and then promptly released, but also desperate to tell him she was *there* . He wasn't alone. Makoto was safe. He was safe.

But instead, she said *nothing* , walked into their room, and fell onto the bed. She buried her face into her pillow and cried.

A few minutes later, the bed shifted and she lifted her head from the pillow to find Akihiko sitting beside her, his hand hovering over one of hers. “I’m sorry,” was all he could say, his voice strained from crying. But that was all he needed to say. She threw herself into him and held on to him as tightly as she could. His embrace was less powerful, but as she continued to cry into his chest, he repeated his apology until she had heard enough and *kissed* him.

It may not have been the most appropriate of circumstances, but it ignited the spark in their relationship that she had missed for *months* .

Her overall attitude began to improve. Akihiko had been suspended following his charges, but he was never formally arrested. She found out that Sae had actually jumped through several hoops to keep him out of prison, a gesture that spoke *volumes* to her, and more importantly, to her father. For as much as she claimed that she hated him, told him that she would never forgive him, she *knew* the kind of man he was and had vouched for him. She *defended* him in front of her superiors, in front of *his* superiors, and he was only given a two-week unpaid suspension as punishment for nearly killing a man.

However, Makoto was still much the same. Minako didn’t want to think about her purposely hiding anything from her once school had started again. The last time she noticed a sort of regression, she found out that a teacher had scared her enough that she attacked him. Naturally, that’s what she thought was happening again, even if Makoto swore up and down that she hadn’t been in contact with the man.

Akihiko planned to drop Makoto off at school when she had to go meet the new transfer student. A familiar, playful spirit came alive in her as she watched the two of them head for the door.

“Remember, a transfer student always gets the cute senior.”

Makoto huffed and rolled her eyes, but it took Akihiko a few more

minutes to understand what Minako had said. “W-Wait, *what?!”*

She laughed when Makoto glared at her, but then she dragged her father out of the apartment before Minako could say anything else.

Akihiko said he was going to be out late with Sakamoto, so she didn’t expect him home any time soon. But when Makoto walked through the door about two hours later, Minako beamed at her.

“So?”

Makoto came to sit on the couch adjacent to her and flipped on the TV, clearly not interested in the conversation she was trying to start. “I don’t want to talk about this.”

Minako stood up and sat down beside her, draping an arm over her shoulder and taking the remote from Makoto’s hand. “Is he cute?”

The tension in her shoulders made her think that yes, this boy *was* cute, but it wasn’t until Makoto turned a bright enough red that she laughed.

“What’s his name? What year is he? What does he look like? Where does he live?”

Makoto moved her hands to cover her face and groaned. “Stop it, Mom.”

She poked her shoulder with her other hand. “If you don’t tell me, I can ask your father to look him up.”

Her daughter stiffened at the threat, then removed her hands and clasped them together on her lap. “His name is Ren Amamiya. He’s a second year. The best way to describe him is that he’s tall, relatively thin, has a messy hairstyle, and wears big, black glasses. I don’t know where he lives.”

Minako hugged her. “See? That wasn’t so hard.” Makoto only turned away from her. “You were gone for a lot longer than you said you would be.”

Her face darkened again, but Minako managed to keep her laughter

to herself. “Someone dropped him off and didn’t come back to pick him up. He’s new to Tokyo, to a big city in general, so I offered to show him to the station and made sure he knew how to get home.”

A part of her wanted to squeal in high school delight at how *adorable* their first meeting had gone, but she was also very proud of her daughter. She loosened her grip on her shoulders and retracted her arm. “I’m proud of you, Makoto.”

Makoto offered a small smile at the praise, or at the fact she had stopped hounding her for more details. “He’s very polite, but I am a little concerned that someone from the country is going to be overwhelmed by a city the size of Tokyo.”

Minako had to agree. Akihiko had been *terrible* at growing accustomed to the city life. She loved the change, but…it would have been better had he not been so nervous about it.

“Why did he transfer to the city, do you know?”

Makoto shook her head. “I don’t. I didn’t want to dive into his personal life after simply giving him a tour of the school.”

She saw something flash over Makoto’s face, but she never got the chance to ask her what it was. “I think he’s going to be a good student at least.” Makoto shot her a glare. “A *student.* Not a boyfriend.”

Minako couldn’t contain her laughter this time, her earlier worry disappearing. “I didn’t think your father was a good student or a good boyfriend for a while and I still fell in love with him.”

Makoto was quiet for several minutes, but before Minako could stand or speak, Makoto looked at her with an expression on her face she hadn’t realized she would miss. “Why did you fall in love with Dad?”

Everything about Makoto’s countenance had been warm, interested, but overall, *happy* . She had told Makoto a few of the major details about how she had met Akihiko the first time, but she never really told either of her children *why* she loved him. Given the recent

kickstart in their relationship, Minako actually wanted to tell her the full story (minus the parts about Tartarus and Death), not only to answer Makoto's question, but to relive the experience for herself.

"To be perfectly honest with you, he annoyed me more than anything else." Makoto chuckled into her hand as Minako put her arm around her again. "He was cute, but the little things he did that frustrated me made me think he wasn't as wonderful as the rest of his fan club had thought he was."

"Dad had a *fan club?!"*

Minako smiled and playfully rolled her eyes. "I didn't even know who he was on my first day of school, but that didn't stop hordes of girls from coming out and hating me for living in the same dorm he did."

Makoto stiffened in surprise. "You lived in a dorm with *guys?!"*

She had to carefully maneuver around the issue that yes, it was a mixed dorm, but they all had a purpose. A purpose she wouldn't come out and tell her daughter. "Don't worry. Mitsuru was in charge, and you *know* how she can be very strict. Do you know what would happen to a guy if he tried to sneak into a girl's room?"

"Did Dad sneak into your room?"

Minako kept the truth to herself. "Is he still alive?"

A soft laugh and a nod came from Makoto, then she continued. "Regardless of his irritating commitment to training and bizarre eating habits, he had this spirit about him that was hard to walk away from. He was oblivious to so much, but there was something different about him when he put on his gloves. He was almost a completely different person."

She sighed, then her voice lost some of its intensity. "I told him once that I thought he was being consumed by his desire to fight, his ridiculous training schedule, and maybe if he stepped away from it all, he would actually come to enjoy life."

Minako let a wave of silence fill the room before Makoto prodded her to speak. "That was when he told me that he would never lose

anyone he cared about again. There was a fire in his eyes that I usually only saw when he was fighting. It made me realize he wasn't training for all hours of the day just to win his matches. He was doing it because he was scared and that was how he fought through his fears."

She leaned back against the couch and took a deep breath. "I don't know for sure if that's when I realized I liked him, but I started to see more signs that he liked *me* shortly after that. I tried to get him to understand the emotion he was feeling, but it wasn't until after he lost his best friend that something clicked in him."

She can still remember sitting there on the couch in the dorm, feeling him shaking beside her. *"All of this time and I still couldn't save him!"*

Akihiko had been so angry. She honestly didn't know what to do to tell him it was going to be okay. She didn't even know if *she* was going to be okay. He had let her sit next to him for several hours, one of her hands on his leg and the other on his opposite shoulder. When the rage turned to exhaustion, he stood up and walked up the stairs without a word.

She thought he was going to take weeks to recover.

A warm smile came to her face. "A few days later, he asked to speak to me after school. We walked to the nearby shrine where he always loved to show off how fast he could climb up to the top of the tower of metal bars. But he didn't do that this time. He instead dropped a bomb on me and told me he thought of me as his sister and *that* I still hold over his head from time to time."

"Dad has a sister?"

Even though the two of them had been together for so long, Minako still felt Akihiko's sister was too personal for her to talk about without him. Plus, she never knew her besides the few times he had mentioned her in passing. "I'd rather you ask your dad that."

When Makoto nodded at her, she kept on with her story. "I knew from the way he said it that he didn't mean it. He just didn't know

how else to explain what he was feeling. So I pulled him aside the next afternoon and told him that he was in love with me."

Makoto gasped beside her. " *You* told him that?"

She laughed. "I did. I had to. And I thought it would fix all the awkwardness he would show around me. But, it didn't. There were times I actually regretted telling him at all."

"But then," she drifted off, that warm feeling starting to bloom in her chest. "Then he gave me that music box. While I was touched enough by the gift, he told me that's not why he got it. It wasn't meant to be the first of his presents to me, but a promise of something that would never end. He promised me he would buy me something every year to put in it. He promised me he would fight to not only protect me, but to protect *us* ."

She looked over at Makoto with a few tears blurring her vision, but Makoto only offered her a growing smile. "That was why I fell in love with him. Through all the heartache, the regret, the pain, he was able to rise through it all to promise someone like me a future. It's been hard at times, *very* hard, but he never stops *fighting* ."

She pulled Makoto into her so she wouldn't see her tears. "I love him. I do. Even when it *hurts* , I still love him. I promised to be his strength when he was weak, and I've failed him so many times. But he told me the other day that he would never let me go without a fight, that he would keep getting stronger, and that same fire was back in his eyes as bright and loud as it had been when he was younger."

They were both quiet for a few moments, but then Minako turned Makoto's face to her. "I know I've let you down too, but know this: I will never leave your father. I'm going to help him fight. I'm going to be that strength he needs when he feels he's losing. And if you see me slipping, I want you to tell me. Get angry with me. Because sometimes your strength is what this family needs to come together again."

Makoto tried to look away, but Minako held on to her firmly. "I hope one day that you find a great guy who is willing to look at you the

same way your father can still look at me."

It was her attempt to keep her daughter from crying, and it worked. Makoto's blush returned to her face and she pulled herself from her grip. "D-Don't say things like that!"

Then the jokes rolled off her tongue. "Don't tell your dad that this boy is already stealing your heart."

"He's *not!* I just met him today! And if what you said was true about dad, then it would take years for me to like him, *if* I wanted to!"

Minako leaned back and smiled. "You're skipping all the teeth-pulling steps I had to go through since this young man seems to be more like me than your father."

Makoto didn't reply and shot off the couch and walked into the kitchen. It wasn't until Akihiko came home that the conversation picked back up. Makoto sat next to him at dinner, her daughter's eyes staring at her until Akihiko became slightly uncomfortable.

"Did something happen?"

Minako broke eye contact with Makoto and laughed into her hand. "Oh, nothing."

"Mom's trying to set me up with the new transfer student."

Akihiko was silent. Then, " *What?"*

And while Makoto continued to bury her face behind her hands as Minako told a horrified Akihiko that she just thought it would be cute, she couldn't help but feel like things were finally looking up again.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16

Makoto told herself they were only rumors.

Amamiya wasn't a criminal. He didn't belong to the yakuza. He didn't stab someone and keep that same knife on him every day to threaten people with. When did the student body become so *animated?* If they would have put this kind of dedication towards studying, everyone would have perfect marks on every test.

It didn't stop her mind from wandering though. She noticed when she gave him the tour of the school the other day that he had been very reserved. She assumed he was shy, being new to Shujin and all, but even as she walked with him to the station, she sensed it. She also got that feeling in her gut that he was hiding something, but she didn't want to overstep her bounds and offend him if it was nothing. Plus, it wasn't her place to ask.

Had she escorted a criminal to the station? Had he thought about trying to do something to her? She knew she could probably take him in a fight with how thin he was, but the school uniform he wore did little to clue her in on his physical capabilities.

She heard her mother's voice laughing in her head and the blush was instantly to follow. She admitted to herself, *not* to her mother or father, that Amamiya was actually somewhat attractive. She didn't know if it was the mysterious air she sensed about him that pulled her into him, the way he always seemed to have a warm smile on his face, or if it actually *was* his looks.

That all hit a brick wall when she walked into school that morning and heard the whispers.

It all dropped like a ten-ton weight into her stomach when she found out he had been late to school on his first day. With *Sakamoto* no less.

With no student council meeting or a desire to face her mother, she decided to head to the library after school. She needed a distraction. What better way for her to clear her mind than for her to fill it with knowledge and test questions and notes she had taken in class? The library would be peaceful. She could escape the whispers, the rumors, the images of a seemingly docile boy shedding his uniform and revealing horrific tattoos, brandishing a blade with a sinister laugh.

She took her seat at the table closest to the door and pulled out her materials. No one appeared to notice she was there since it really wasn't an unusual sight. She started with her notes, re-reading them for important pieces, then writing them more clearly on a separate sheet of paper. Her mom told her it was something her dad did a lot in high school, but then Makoto came to find out that he usually copied off of Mitsuru's notes when she wasn't guarding them.

A smile broke out on her face. It was nice to feel like a family again. Her dad was much happier. Her mom was much happier. *She* was much happier. She didn't want to admit that she was worried the next problem that struck the family was going to be the last, but she told herself she wouldn't let it come to that.

Makoto was pulled out of her thoughts when she heard the chair next to her gently scrape on the floor. She noticed that the rest of the room was eerily quiet, almost like everyone had left and she was alone. That sinking feeling made her grip her pencil tighter in her hands, terrified that she *was* alone and Kamoshida was going back to his usual "chats" with her.

She made a promise to her hysterical father that she wouldn't be caught alone with Kamoshida. But she heard that he had to take a few days off to recover from his injuries. Apparently, her dad did quite a number on him, so there was no way Kamoshida would be back to school within the month.

Plus, Kamoshida didn't wear a Shujin uniform, dark rimmed glasses, a kind smile on his face and…

"Hi, Niijima-senpai."

If she felt that similar dread in her stomach with Amamiya as she did with Kamoshida, what did that mean about him? Were the rumors true? *Did* he attack someone? She didn't think it was possible that he could do much damage, but her intuition told her differently. One need not be fit in order to hurt someone.

She stared down at her notes in front of her once he sat down. She didn't want to appear rude or nervous, but she was fairly sure it showed in her voice. "C-Can I help you?"

The library became a mumble of words again. If her heart hadn't been pounding in her ears, she would have been able to make out what they were saying. She recognized some words: *delinquent* and *president* and *mafia,* but not any real sentences. Still, she kept her eyes on her notes and willed herself to *move* before Amamiya got upset and did something rash. Would he?

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him studying her with a blank expression. She started to grow more uncomfortable, but then she heard him sigh. She looked over at him to find that unkempt hair blocking her view of his eyes.

"You're afraid of me, too."

He was so quiet that she couldn't be sure of what he said. However, he pushed his chair back and retrieved his school bag sitting on the floor. When he met her eyes, she felt something akin to regret replacing her fear.

"I apologize for bothering you."

He left the library as quickly as he had come, but Makoto continued to stare after him long after he was gone. There had been a look in his eyes that *hurt* her, a mix between sorrow, terror, and disbelief. She didn't know how to feel, which is why she didn't stop him when he left.

The voices around her picked up. "Did he hurt her?"

"Did she say something to him and now he's going to stab her?"

"That's some balls he has to sit next to the president."

Makoto grabbed her notes and carefully stowed them in her bag before standing and following after Amamiya. It was probably a lost cause looking for him, but she tried anyway. She first went to the front gates to see if she could find him heading to the station, but either he was long gone, or he hadn't left the school grounds. She really didn't know where else students would go unless it was to their respective clubs or the library, but she couldn't just stand around and wait for him to leave. She had too much nervous energy to sit still.

But when she turned to head back inside, she heard a loud hiss that scared her half to death. Her eyes scanned the area in front of her until she saw a black figure jump into the bushes. It was small…a cat, maybe? Had she stepped on it? She braced herself in case the cat jumped back out and attacked her, but after a few minutes, she assumed the animal ran off.

She took a deep breath and placed a hand over her heart. She should go home. It was getting to be that time anyway. She couldn't handle another startled surprise with how wound up she was right now.

Despite all of that, she wanted to do one final walk-through to find Amamiya. There was something telling her he hadn't left and she was determined to find him and apologize. What she was wanting to apologize for she didn't know yet, but that look in his eyes still haunted her as if he was staring at her at that moment. Plus, if he really was a criminal, she didn't want to give him a reason to pick her out from the crowds and go after her.

She turned the corner and made her way out to the courtyard vending machines, a typical place students like to hang out at lunch time or right after school. She sighed in disappointment when he wasn't there. No one was there. So where else would students go if they needed to get away and still be on campus?

Another chill ran down her spine and she held the strap of her bag tighter in her hands. She swallowed hard and slowly turned around, hoping the bone-crushing fear was due to her wild imagination, thanks to the events of the afternoon.

It wasn't.

"It's *so* nice to see you again."

Makoto's heart leapt into her throat as Kamoshida took a step towards her. Then another. Before she could blink, her back was against the wall and he slammed his hands right above her head. That twisted smile was stretching across his face as he looked down on her like he was a predator trapping his prey.

"Your cop friend did quite a number on me. Put me in the hospital for a day or two. Doctor told me to take the next few weeks off to fully recover." One of his hands brushed some of her hair out of her face. She tried to slap him away, but his other hand caught her easily. "I wonder how he would feel if I did the same to you?"

She could feel the tears beading up in the corner of her eyes. Why had she agreed to stay? How had Kamoshida recovered enough to hold her back when students thought he was *dead?* She told herself that she could still find a way out. He was weak. She wasn't as trapped as she had been last time. There was still enough space that she could move around him and get out of there.

He must have read her mind, for the next second, he pinned the hand he caught earlier above her head and used his hips to keep her against the wall. She twisted against him, something he simply laughed at, until his free hand cradled her face and his fingers brushed through the fringes of her hair.

"Now, now, given Sanada's reaction, I would assume this will be your first time. Don't be nervous." As much as she tried not to, the tears spilled over onto her face. Why wasn't anyone else around?! "The more tense you are, the more I'm going to hurt you to get inside of you."

She wasn't just going to suffer a few bruises and cuts.

She almost threw up on him, but his fingers latched around her hair and yanked hard enough that she was forced to look up at him

through the blinding pain. “This is a much better look on you, Niijima-san.”

Her last resort was to scream or try and bite him, but before a single breath could pass her lips, he released her hand and brought his fingers around her throat. His grip was tight and her head smacked back against the wall trying to escape him. She tried to claw at him, to pull his hand off of her, but he pushed himself into her more as he squeezed his hand.

“This is what happens when you cross me.”

The next second happened too fast for her to comprehend with what little oxygen was reaching her brain.

Kamoshida released her and she coughed as her lungs sucked in more air. He screamed and reached at something behind him. She saw that something jump off of his back and on to the top of his head and Kamoshida howled in pain again.

Lightning hit her and she scrambled to her feet and ran past Kamoshida back into the main building. She fumbled over her keys to lock the door and give herself more time to escape, but she was still shaking too much for that to be effective. She ran out into the main street and looked behind her to see if Kamoshida was giving chase. When she didn’t see him, she exhaled deeply and ran a hand over her face.

What the hell had happened? Did it even happen at all?

“Niijima-senpai?”

As uncharacteristic as it was, she yelped, the sound cracking in her sore throat, and she almost tripped over her own feet turning to the voice that startled her.

It was Amamiya.

His eyes were wide, lips parted in surprise, and hands held up in front of him as a sign of peace. He kept his distance, but he eventually took one step towards her. “Are you okay?”

There was soft concern in his voice. It was enough of an emotion that she felt the tears returning to her eyes as she bit her lip to keep from worrying him even more. A hand went to the base of her neck to soothe her throat. “I-I…” She shook her head, hard, and inhaled to keep herself steady. It hurt to even speak. “I…I’m okay.”

He took another step towards her, but when she didn’t move back, he took another, and one more until he was within reaching distance. Makoto watched him as he removed his uniform blazer and moved to stand next to her. She soon felt a heavy warmth come over her (she hadn’t realized she was *freezing*) as he gingerly placed the jacket over her shoulders.

“Let me take you home.”

She said nothing when he offered her his arm, but she grabbed onto him immediately. During the walk, he constantly asked her if she was okay or if she needed anything. He even bought her a bottled water at the station and gave it to her. While the water helped to cool her irritated throat, the kindness Amamiya was showing her helped to calm her down the most.

She stood next to him on the train, one of his hands holding a nearby pole and the other loosely wrapped around her back. At one point, he asked her if she was uncomfortable with him being so close to her, but she shook her head and pulled his jacket higher over her shoulders.

Makoto felt much better when they reached Shibuya Station. She was still shaking a little, her mind running a million scenarios in her head, but she was safe now. She was out of Kamoshida’s range. She was so close to being home with her mom and her dad and it helped her relax.

However, Amamiya continued to help her to her connection. Before she walked through the electronic gates to her line, she released his arm and turned to him.

“Why?” It wasn’t what she really wanted to say, but she blamed the stress for her terrible word choice.

If Amamiya took offense, he didn't show it. In fact, his eyes remained calm and warm, a small smile on his lips, and it almost made her tear up again. "You looked like you needed help."

It was a simple and vague answer, but it struck her heart like a mallet. She judged him as a criminal, but a *criminal* was the only person who came to her side when she needed someone. How many other people had passed her on the street outside of school before he had approached her? Not that she was *proud* of the fact he felt obligated to help her, but she reminded herself that any normal person in her situation would have reacted much the same way.

Amamiya stretched his arm out towards the gate, as if telling her to go on through and he would be right behind her. And he did follow after her. He stood beside her on the train, walked next to her once they got off, and followed a step behind her as they walked out of the station.

It was getting late. Knowing she was only a few minutes from home, she removed his blazer and folded it neatly in her arms before handing it back to him. "Thank you, Amamiya-kun." She bowed to him once he took the jacket, then she stood up straight and rubbed her arm with her hand. She missed the warmth already, and it wasn't even that cold out.

"I greatly appreciate your kindness."

His expression remained unchanged from before. "I'm glad I was able to help."

Makoto wanted to tell him again how much his actions had meant to her, but she didn't want to keep him. "I hope you can get home safely."

His smile widened slightly. "Are you going to be okay getting home from here?"

Despite the comfort she had felt around him while he escorted her home, she felt a cold poke in her chest. If he followed her home, was he going to hurt her? Was he going to do to her what

Kamoshida wanted to do to her?

“Forgive me, Niijima-senpai. I didn’t mean to frighten you.”

He was either wonderful at reading peoples’ thoughts or she was *terrible* at keeping them off her face. A wave of embarrassment hit her hard enough that words stumbled out of her mouth. “N-no! I…I’m sorry. It’s just that…”

“You think I’m going to hurt you.”

Her breath left in one mad rush of regret. She dropped her head to her chest. “It’s wrong of me to think that after everything you’ve done for me today.”

She heard ruffling in front of her, so she lifted her head enough to see him slipping his jacket back on. He locked eyes with her the next second. “You were kind enough to make me feel comfortable when I first arrived in Tokyo. I want to do the same for you.” She straightened her back when he took a step towards her. “I want to protect you.”

That had been unexpected. “W-What?”

The smile fell from his face and his eyes lost much of the light he had shown earlier. “I know about Kamoshida. I know about what he’s doing.” He took another step. “And I know you don’t know me. But I will protect you from him, just like you saved me from my own fear when I was lost and feeling helpless.”

She only stared at him in shock, unable to look away from him. There was something in his eyes that told her he meant it. He would keep her safe. He would be the watchdog her father couldn’t be while she was at school. It brought so many confusing feelings into her heart, but she oddly felt like she could trust him.

“I hope one day that you find a great guy who is willing to look at you the same way your father can still look at me.”

Makoto clasped her hands together in front of her as the warmth inside her spread throughout her body. “T-Thank you, Amamiya-kun.”

He bowed to her, wished her a good night, then walked back into the station.

When her mother asked her how school had been, she glanced over her untouched dinner to her father, then told them what happened with Kamoshida.

She wasn't surprised when her dad started shouting and her mom had to tell him to calm down. But he stayed with them that night instead of storming off like she expected him to. He sat down with her in her bed like he always did when she was a child. He handed her the Buchimaru plushie that he had gotten her for Christmas the past year and she held it tightly against her chest. He stayed with her and told her stories about her mother, their friends she didn't personally know, stories about her being too excited to greet him at the door as a child that she cut corners too fast and smacked into walls.

Thanks to her dad, she was finally able to fall asleep.

But it was memories of Amamiya's kindness that helped her sleep peacefully.

Chapter 17

Chapter 17

Ren exhaled deeply enough that the action caused him to fall onto his bed.

His fingers found their way into his hair, grabbing fistfuls and yanking hard enough to help relieve the tension building up behind his eyes. It helped him focus on something other than the nauseating images of that perverted castle and the chained young girls with naked bodies and lifeless eyes. Their cries had only been to shout for “King Kamoshida” to come to them, to make them his, to let them please him because that’s all they were good for.

He thought of that woman from back home. The one he tried to save. The same one that ignored *his* pleas and turned her back on him.

Yet here he was, different city, different people, same situation. But this time, he wasn’t alone.

Ryuji may have been loud and crass at times, but he was a surprisingly good kid. He had a passion to help that Ren had been jealous of. Ryuji didn’t care what people thought of him. He didn’t care how he was labeled. All he cared about was doing what he knew was right and “eff everyone else, man!”

Ann was much more quiet, but she had the same kind of energy Ryuji did, just at a tolerable level. She wasn’t afraid to speak her mind or to tell Ryuji to “shut the hell up!” She would do anything for her friend and had been willing to make compromises with a man like Kamoshida to *help* her. She had a lot in common with him, being a previous transfer student herself, so it was nice to have someone to relate with, even if she hadn’t been as welcoming on day one as Ryuji had been.

Neither one of them cared that he was labeled a criminal. They were actually very supportive. Ryuji had been shocked when he told him

half of the truth, commenting that he didn't think Ren would hurt a fly. Ann had told him that she knew how it felt to have rumors go around that weren't true, knew how it felt to have them alienate you, but told him not to let them keep him down.

As much as he told himself they were only rumors, they became something more when he had reached out to Niijima-senpai at the library. She had been *terrified* of him. The same pleasant and kind young girl that didn't seem to care then about who he was now wanted a ten-meter wall built between the two of them.

But he knew she was in trouble. He found out as much on their second trip to Kamoshida's twisted castle. She had been on his radar for over a year now, but she had been harder to get his hands on than Ann's friend or any of the other volleyball players. He didn't need to know the rest of the details, nor did he *want* to know them.

Which is why he had asked Morgana to keep an eye out on her while he met with Ryuji and Ann on the roof after school that day. The only reason he had dropped by the library was to make sure she was actually *there* and not on her way home. Her fear had simply scared him off before he got a chance to ask about her well-being.

However, when he ran into her again after he had split up with his friends, he knew what had happened.

Their entire walk to the closest station to her house, he saw that woman, screaming at him to help before that man did something to hurt her.

He saw that woman turning away from him when he saw Niijima-senpai cringe when he asked if she would be okay getting the rest of the way home.

Her fear struck him like a knife through his chest. He couldn't really blame her, even after he was stupid enough to tell her he would protect her. It wasn't that he didn't mean it, or that he didn't want to, but who in their right mind *wouldn't* be terrified of a boy they had just met coming out and saying something like that? Especially after what had just happened to her?

He saw her in chains once in the palace. He told himself that he wouldn't let it happen at the school, regardless of if she knew him or not. He would have done the same for any one of the students. It just so happened to be her that he saw and her that Kamoshida attacked that afternoon.

He just didn't know what else to do to help her. Maybe he was too forward, too open and honest with someone that didn't know him. He felt more at ease when she relaxed after his vow to protect her, but now that he was back in his room, his mind began to turn against him.

Would she go to the police and tell them he freaked her out?

Would she go to her parents and tell them that some criminal had told her he would protect her and her pissed off father would find him and murder him?

Would she go to the principal and ask him to be expelled?

He knew very little about her, so why did he feel like all he wanted to do was help her?

"A 'Thank you' would be a good way to start this conversation."

Ren let go of his hair and his hands fell onto the bed by his side. He looked up to find Morgana, the strange monster-cat-but-not-cat (?) walking over to sit down on the floor in front of him. Those deep blue eyes of his hardened when Ren remained silent for too long, but then he shook his head.

"Thank you, Morgana."

The cat still eyed him angrily. "I saved that girl, you know. I guess you could say that we're even now."

The fact Morgana chose to use the word "save" meant that nothing *terrible* happened to Niijima-senpai. Hopefully. She was still extremely shaken up, but he thought that some rest would help to calm her down.

"Why are you so interested in her?"

Ren stared blankly at Morgana, trying to buy some time to come up with an answer while knowing he wanted one *now* . “She was my first friend.”

He told Morgana about his first day in Tokyo, how everyone had been so cold to him, but Niijima-senpai had been a sort of breath of fresh air. He thought of her as someone who acted much older than she was, which wasn’t a *bad* thing, but it helped explain some of her reactions. She was very tense, even at times when he saw her from down the hall at school in the days following their meeting. There was some sort of air about her that made him think that she felt like she had to live up to everyone’s expectations, no matter how high the bar got.

He hadn’t forgotten how he felt when he saw her laugh and smile that first day.

He sure as hell wasn’t going to forget how he felt when she latched onto his arm with shaky hands and a weak grip.

So yeah. She was his first friend, one that may or may not have been scared of him, but one he wanted to protect regardless.

“Kamoshida said something about how her cop friend beat the snot out of him and he’s still recovering.” Morgana’s hind leg came to scratch the back of his ear. “This is actually good for us. He’s not in perfect condition. We need to take care of his palace as soon as possible before he gets back to full strength.”

While he agreed that they needed to end things quickly, his motivation was to prevent any more women from falling prey to the hands of a man they couldn’t fight off alone.

It didn’t stop the nightmares from haunting him in his sleep.

He had no idea how he was able to stumble onto the train the next morning.

The coffee that Sakura-san had made him that morning had kicked in on his ride to Shibuya. He was still pretty tired, but he could pick up some more coffee from the vending machines outside of school

(horrible in comparison to Sakura-san's blend, but he needed the caffeine).

He got a quick jolt of energy when someone snuck up behind him and almost made him drop his phone.

"I didn't mean to surprise you, Amamiya-kun."

He glanced over his shoulder to find Niijima-senpai coming to stand beside him. He threw on a polite smile. "Good morning, Niijima-senpai."

She grabbed the strap of her bag over her shoulder and turned to stare at the empty tracks in front of her. "I would like to thank you again for your help last night."

He was touched by her need to over-thank him, but he shook his head. "Did you sleep well?"

He wanted to smack himself in the face. A high school girl had been cornered and threatened by a teacher three times her size and a cat had been her only saving grace. Of *course* she wouldn't sleep well. Why did he have to say stupid things?

But he caught a hint of a smile on her face. "I actually did, thank you."

Ren may have not expected to hear that, but he was strangely elated by it. Whether or not his presence in her time of need had anything to do with it, it was nice to know he hadn't added any more trauma or concern to her situation.

"I'm glad to hear it."

She turned her head to look at him, then a frown replaced her smile. "You don't look like you slept well."

A part of him was embarrassed to have a girl, a cute girl, study him enough to recognize the signs of his exhaustion. To keep himself steady, he placed his hands into his pockets. "I'm still adjusting to the city."

He worried for a moment that his half-truth had not been enough for her when she placed a hand under her chin. Her eyes flashed with determination and he felt his heart skip a beat, a wave of nervousness washing over him.

“I can write a pass for your teacher so you can have an extended lunch break.” The hand at her shoulder tightened around the strap. “It may not be much, but it can give you an hour or two to catch up on your sleep.”

He tried not to gape at her, the sentiment almost *too* touching for him. He wanted to tell her that it wasn’t necessary, but the words wouldn’t come out of his mouth. He silently thanked the train for approaching and fending off the awkward silence that was going to follow.

“Come see me at lunch in the student council room and I’ll have your pass ready for you.”

He almost missed the train standing there in shock. The idea of an hour nap sounded *wonderful* to him, but he knew the second he closed his eyes, there was going to be an image that would wake him right back up. Coffee would keep him awake and give him the energy to at least finish the school day. Ryuji and Morgana (Ann was still too new for his liking) were good enough support in the palace that he could be slightly off his game and still power on through. The quicker they got to the end of that castle, the better.

But after being smacked in the head with a flying piece of chalk, courtesy of Mr. Ushimaru, he decided to take Niijima-senpai’s offer.

He was dragging his feet down the halls, struggling to keep his eyes open. The second floor was unusually quiet for lunch, which only made him feel more tired. Morgana was nice enough (or doing it for his own reasons) to keep poking him with a claw to keep him moving. But if he were honest, all he wanted to do was curl up in a corner and fall asleep. It wouldn’t be any less comfortable than his make-shift bed above the café.

Just when he thought he was going to pass out on the floor, something snapped him to attention.

The door to the principal's office opened and slammed shut. Before he had half the mind to *move* , someone barreled into him. Ren was quite impressed that the collision didn't send him flying down the stairs.

He was a man he had never seen before, not surprisingly, but one he was immediately intimidated by. Rage was swimming in his dark gray eyes. He was very tense, looked very strong and very able to pick Ren up and break him in half. Even though the man had silver hair, he didn't look to be that old; Ren would have put him in the ballpark of forty, maybe fifty. He was dressed far too businesslike to be a teacher at the school, but the dark blood red dress shirt only made his anger that much more apparent.

His expression softened tremendously once he realized Ren was *not* whoever he was so pissed off at and he ran one of his gloved hands through his hair. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to run into you."

He sounded as tired as Ren felt, but there was an odd feeling he was getting from this man. He couldn't describe it, but it was like Arsene was speaking to him and he couldn't make out what he was saying. He didn't dwell on it for too long as the man in front of him pulled the dark-colored jacket he was holding in his other hand over his shoulder. Ren watched as he side-stepped around him, the anger coming back to his features, then he walked down the stairwell and out of his sight.

Morgana voiced his own thoughts. "Wow. What do you think that was about?"

Ren shook his head, his fatigue coming back to the forefront of his mind. "I don't know, but I don't think it was good."

Morgana didn't question him further as he powered his way up the stairs and to the student council room. He knocked twice on the door and waited for a signal to enter. Niijima-senpai's voice came through the door allowing him to step inside, so he shook his head to help wake him up enough to open the damn thing without alerting Niijima-senpai of his exhaustion.

"Amamiya-kun. You look like you're going to pass out."

Her concern, again, was touching, but the second he landed in a seat, his eyelids became too heavy for him to keep awake. “I’m really sorry.”

If she said something to him, he didn’t hear it as he drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18

The only question that ran through his head was *why?*

Why did no one take Sakamoto's assault seriously? Why did it matter if he was a troubled kid? He was a *victim* and the police just turned a blind eye because they thought he *deserved* it.

Why did the principal think that Kamoshida was a wonderful teacher and a great asset to the staff? Why did he tell him there was nothing to worry about? Why did he think that a few bruised and bandaged students were normal with an "aggressive sport" like volleyball?

Why did he think he was *lying* to him about the attack on his *daughter?* Granted he left out a name, but that didn't stop the anger from coming across in his tone. The principal had told him that since he had physically assaulted Kamoshida, anything he were to say and do now were lies and an act of aggression on the teacher.

He wouldn't allow Akihiko to come storming in, pointing the finger and accusing Kamoshida of being a criminal, but he could defend the man even with enough circumstantial evidence that could easily warrant an investigation.

But why couldn't he *do anything?!*

He had stormed out of the principal's office after he was threatened with a formal report to his superiors for harassment, which he didn't really need seeing that he was still on suspension. To make his day even better, he scared that poor kid he almost knocked down the stairs half to death. He couldn't go into the police station and hand over what he knew to the *right* people since he wasn't allowed in the building, so he did the next best thing.

He contacted the media.

It was an underhanded tactic he never wanted to use since it usually

required him to spill the beans about open cases he didn't want to disclose. However, he did trust (to an extent) a few of them, especially one who had helped expose a few sex trafficking rings hidden in Kabukicho. He knew he was pushing his luck, likely going to lose his job if wind of his leak got out to his superiors, but it was the last thing he could think of to *help* .

It wasn't unusual for him to be in Kabukicho, even off-duty, so that was where he headed to meet his contact. They didn't reply to his message, but he knew that any amount of secrecy was welcomed when he stepped over the line of "ethical police work." The location wasn't anything that would stick out as a sore thumb to anyone tailing him to make sure he was staying out of trouble. He would sometimes go to the bar to meet with Mitsuru, or a cop from another district or even his own, just to make it seem "normal" in situations like this.

Akihiko was quite surprised when the door to the bar opened for him (the bar had VIP hours for him and maybe a few others and it required a coded knock on the door), and there was one lady sitting at the counter. It was too early for normal customers, but the owner only pushed him inside with a bump of a shoulder.

"Well, don't be shy honey. She's not going to bite you."

Lala Escargot was a strange person, but she (or he, he really didn't know and didn't feel comfortable asking) was always very friendly. She had to be to allow him to show up a few hours before she opened her bar. She had been helpful in gaining information for him, on the down-low of course, that drunk patrons had unknowingly spilled. She had been a wonderful ally, which is why he had chosen to frequent her bar when he needed to be covert or when he needed to not look suspicious in the future.

The lady sitting at the bar, however, was *not* his contact and she was far too happy to see him. "Oh, you must be that super awesome and good-guy cop that Lala-chan won't shut up about!"

There was something off about her. He didn't recognize what it was until she stood up, grabbed him by the arm, and pressed herself into him like he was a big, warm, fuzzy blanket.

She was drunk.

“I’d be careful there, girl. Man’s got a wife, so I wouldn’t hug him too tight.”

Akihiko froze in his spot and everything went black for a second. How the hell did Lala know *that?* He never spoke about his family, he thought. He never drank heavily, if at all, to the point something like that would slip off his tongue without him remembering it.

Lala came around the bar and clapped him on the shoulder. “You learn to read people in my line of work,” she said with a growing smile. “And if you’re not careful, someone will see your ring.”

His immediate reaction was to throw his left hand into his pocket. Had he taken his gloves off at one point? No…he *never* did in public. Could she *see* it through the material? …Could *other* people see it?

“I don’t know her name sweetheart, so it’s okay.” He thought he heard her laugh. “But, thanks to your reaction, now I really do know you’re married.”

The fact Lala didn’t know *who* he was married to didn’t make him feel any better about her *knowing* .

“Let’s have a drink!” The woman still attached to him nearly blew his eardrums out with her shout as she pulled him to where she had been sitting. She literally threw him into the seat next to her and reached for her glass. “Fill me up, Lala-chan!”

Between the revelation of Lala knowing he was married and the crazy and eccentric woman beside him, he felt like he *needed* a drink to calm down. He denied one, much to the unknown lady’s disbelief, and his eyes roamed around the room.

Did his contact get held up? It wasn’t like her to be late. It wasn’t like her to turn him down without a response back with some stupid, off-the-wall comment. He looked at his phone again just to double check while the woman next to him downed her drink in one gulp.

“Lookin’ for someone?”

He looked over at her to find her cup full of liquor again. She shook it in the air, liquid spilling over the sides and onto the counter. An eyebrow was raised and there was a crooked smile on her lips. She eyed him for a very long and uncomfortable second or two before he cleared his throat and looked away.

“No.”

She laughed like he had told her the funniest story she had ever heard. Her hand slapped the wood several times as she hunched over and rested her head by her glass.

Then in the blink of an eye, she lost the humor and sat up in her seat, leaned one arm against the counter, and dropped her head into her palm. “You’re looking for me.”

The seriousness that overtook her literally shook him up. How did one person go from laughing hysterically to stoic and serious with no transition phase? Just who was this girl?

“I’m sorry?”

“What’s the scoop?”

He breathed out his nervousness, finally coming to understand who this girl was. “Nice try, but I don’t have anything to say to you.”

He should have picked up on the reporter vibe the second he saw her, but she did a hell of a job masking it behind her drunk façade. He had never met her before, but he also knew to put the hammer down early and quickly to keep them from crawling up his ass every time he showed himself in the area.

“Then perhaps I’ll give *you* the scoop.”

She reached over and grabbed him by the collar of his shirt, nearly pulling him off of his seat. Her eyes were filled with a rage he would only see from strangers when he had thrown them in the back of a police car. Her voice was quiet, but there was a slicing edge to her tone that intimidated him.

“Kayo isn’t coming to see you anymore.”

She released his shirt and he caught himself before he tipped over, trying to digest her statement. Who was this girl and how the hell did she know about his contact? He gave a look to Lala, who simply shrugged her shoulders and shook her head.

“She was my friend, if you must know, and she took off one day after she got busted for writing a supposedly slanderous article about some big-name hot shot.” The woman took another sip of her drink, a *sip* this time, before slamming the glass on the table. “She left her things behind, which is why when I saw your message, I had to come meet you.”

There were a thousand thoughts running through his mind. He couldn’t honestly believe her after one meeting. He didn’t even really trust reporters to begin with. They would say anything, *do* anything, for an article. So how was he supposed to know that he wasn’t getting set up by either Murakami or this woman *or* their boss?

“You can’t expect a cop to talk to you after you almost throw him off a chair.” Lala stood with her back to them, polishing a couple of the wine bottles before her. She then turned to face both of them and her eyes locked on to his. “She’s annoying half of the time, loud and obnoxious the other half, but she’s got a good heart. I can vouch for her.”

Akihiko was still extremely hesitant, even if Lala did tell him she wasn’t going to be the type of reporter he *hated* . While he was debating his options and trying to think of a way to test the woman, he heard her sigh heavily and shake her now empty glass.

“I’ll drop a bomb on you first, then you can decide what you want to do.” He slowly turned his head and eyed her with intrigue, curious to know what kind of blackmail she was already willing to slam on him. When she met his eyes, she was serious, almost like she didn’t just down three drinks since he had walked through the door.

“I’ve heard you’re having a hard time finding Kaneshiro, but he’s not having a hard time finding you.”

That sent him reeling. “ *What?”*

The ice cubes in her empty cup clinked against the sides and she stared at them like they were the most interesting thing in the world. “Can’t really say more about it until you tell me why you were so eager to speak to Kayo.”

He had been so preoccupied with the immediate threat from Kamoshida that he had put Kaneshiro on the back burner for *months* . No one had attacked him in that time, he hadn’t picked up on that menacing stare that he felt the night he was stabbed, no real word about him had reached his ears, so he moved on to other problems. Lala gave him a look that screamed, *“Now it’s your turn, boy,”* so he sighed and decided to see how the conversation went.

“She wanted dirt on people I was investigating so she could try and bring down corporate CEO’s with shady businesses in Kabukicho. I contacted her quite a bit for criminals around here, which is the district I’m in charge of.” He leaned into the countertop, elbows resting on the surface. “Once the public is aware of corruption, it doesn’t take too long for the big wigs to come out from hiding and start screaming at me. Everything is much easier from there.”

The woman copied his posture. “And what did you do for her when she needed a cop to take her seriously?”

He heard the accusation on her tongue. “With all due respect, it was a simple exchange of information between the two of us. I asked her for the necessary information. She asked for a story. That was it.” He narrowed his eyes at her. “So if you want to blame me for something I didn’t know about, knock yourself out.”

Her fists pounded on the counter. “Some friend *you* were to her!”

He held his hands up. “Friend? We weren’t friends. I knew her name and occupation. She knew mine. That was *it* .”

She pouted, huffed loudly, then crossed her arms. “I’m not going to help you until you help her then.”

He heard Lala snicker in the background, but he had no idea why she thought something was funny. “I don’t trust you.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t trust you either.”

“Children, that’s enough.” Lala placed *another* drink in front of the woman, then surprised him and slid one towards him. “I suggest you have a drink or she’s going to irritate you until you walk out of here and kill someone.”

While Akihiko didn’t want the drink, nor did he want the help of some childish reporter, he reminded himself that he came here with a purpose. What was the worst that would happen if he told this girl about Kamoshida’s abuse? That she wouldn’t go public with it? That she would cover it up like every other person involved was trying to do?

“Fine,” he huffed out after several minutes of hostile silence. “I will *try* to do what I can for Murakami if you agree to publish a story on someone.”

She made eye contact with Lala, who nodded her head once. Then, the woman sighed, pushed her glass out of the way, and turned to face him. “Fine, but if you don’t hold up your end of the bargain, I will make sure the entire city of Tokyo knows that you’re married.”

His heart sank into his stomach. Lala quickly slammed her palm on the spot in front of the girl. “Ohya, that was uncalled for.”

The woman only smirked at him. “Then we have a deal?”

The *only* reason he nodded his head was because yes, he was married, but she didn’t know to *who* and she couldn’t very easily look it up. He knew Lala wouldn’t tell her behind his back, but if she did, she would likely say that Mitsuru was his wife with how often the two of them would meet up here. And he would *love* to see how a criminal spent the last few hours of his freedom making a stupid decision to go after *her* .

They’d feel like death would be a better punishment.

“Then who am I going to write about?”

Right. Now it was back to business. “Suguru Kamoshida.” The name alone was vile enough rolling off his tongue that he grabbed his

drink and brought it to his lips. “He’s assaulting students at Shujin.”

He was curious to know why she wasn’t writing anything down, but she actually appeared quite attentive. “I’ve heard that name before.” She looked away, tapping her finger to her chin while she thought. “Where have I heard that name…?”

“He’s an Olympic athlete.”

“Right!” She sprang to life and faced him again. “Oh, this is juicy stuff you’ve got. An Olympic gold medalist attacking kids? I love it!”

His grip on his drink tightened at how entertained she was at the news. “He broke someone’s leg, beats the shit out of his team, and sexually assaults the female students.” He heard the glass crack in his hand. “This isn’t funny.”

The woman eyed him curiously, then waved her hand in the air. “What evidence do you even have?”

He couldn’t come right out and name names, given that one was his *daughter* , but he had to give her *something* . “I know the boy who broke his leg.”

Her eyes sparkled. “His name?”

He shook his head. “Not gonna happen. He’s a minor, and I would hate to have to arrest you for unethical journalism.”

She thought little of his baseless threat and put her glass back on the counter. “Let me speak to him.”

At this, Akihiko cringed. He didn’t want to bring Ryuji into this, even if he had a feeling the boy would have jumped for joy at a chance to bring down Kamoshida once and for all. “I’ll talk to him, but you won’t speak to him unless he agrees to it and I’m here with you.”

She nodded her head and reached for her drink. “Fair enough.” She took a sip. “Anything you want from me then?”

Don’t tell the world I’m married! “In exchange for me looking into your friend’s disappearance, I want information on Kaneshiro.”

Her eyes narrowed at him. “I thought publishing this story *was* my exchange.” Before he could try and think of something to say to that, she threw her head back and laughed. “You could want all the information in the world, but I don’t have much on him. A name, probably like you do. He’s holed up somewhere in west Tokyo. Can’t be more specific.”

He held his breath. “A first name?”

“Junya Kaneshiro.”

He almost screamed out his delight, but he decided a simple smile would be good enough for her. With a full name now, he could start doing some *real* digging. Well, he would, once Kamoshida was dealt with. “Thank you.”

She finished the last of her drink, then surprised him and reached over and finished off the rest of his. “Now I need you to get on her case.”

“Kamoshida’s story needs to come first.”

She gave him a hard stare. “I will work on it when I can. I have to maintain my own repertoire, as I’m sure you have to maintain yours.” He grit his teeth, but agreed. “I should have something done in a few days if that boy talks, but I won’t publish it until we meet again *after* you find something that can help me find Kayo.”

His shoulders dropped. “Then tell me who I need to look into so I can start looking around.” He grabbed his jacket from the seat next to him.

She turned in her seat to face Lala as she poured her *another* drink. “Masayoshi Shido.”

Chapter 19

Chapter 19

Masayoshi Shido .

Akihiko could feel a rope being tied around his neck before he even *started* looking into the man. How stupid did that reporter have to be to think he was going to be able to find anything that she couldn't find on her own?

Well, she had been *drunk* , even if she was oddly sober, too.

Still, that nagging voice in the back of his head told him there was a *problem* , someone asked him to *do* something about it, and it shouldn't matter if the guy he was asked to investigate had so many rich, powerful, influential political friends that he was never going to reach him before he pissed off the wrong person.

It was hard. Mentally and physically *hard* . He was willing to put his job on the line to put a man like Kamoshida in prison. He would do it even if he didn't have a daughter who had been one of his victims. But *Shido?* If any of his bosses found out he was thinking about *Googling* the man, he would have been fired. All for what? Him to find out that Ohya had been full of shit and wanted dirt on a man of his caliber just for a slam page?

As mentally draining as it had been to think about, he couldn't find anything on Shido. Not that there was a lot about him on the web that a normal person could access, but still. He learned his age, his birthplace, the fact he was a member of the National Diet, but that was about all he could dig up at home.

However…

"Please tell me you were able to find something?"

He had friends. Smart friends. Friends who knew how to hide their trail. Computer tech friends who had agreed to help him. "Well, I

couldn't find much before breaching the security systems." His anxiety faded into disappointment, regardless of the fact that Fuuka was doing this *for him* .

He still held onto the hope that she would find *something* . "Did you manage to find anything?"

"Um." There were clicks of the keyboard in the static silence that filled his ear. He waited as patiently as he could, tapping the top of his pen against the desk he was sitting at. "Nothing that really looks like it couldn't be slander or someone trying to frame him."

Yeah, he's sure if someone looked up Kamoshida, they would think the same thing. "What do you have? I'll try to look into it myself."

He sat up straight and readied his pen. "Well, he seems to be at the forefront of a few questionable scandals, but, um…" A few more clicks. "Odd. He has a security wall up that I'm going to need a minute or two to hack into."

Akihiko paused his writing. "Is…Is that okay? I don't need you getting into trouble on my behalf."

Fuuka chuckled into the phone. "I think I might be insulted, Akihiko."

He only choked out a pathetic, "Sorry," as she continued to do whatever she was good at that he would never understand.

"Okay." He heard her clap in the background. "It looks like he was in a little bit of trouble because of his political views. But…I can't seem to find anything really specific that could help."

Akihiko leaned back in his seat. "Tell me what you were able to find. I can see what I can do with it from there."

"Well, there's quite a few people who tried to discredit him which led to all the scandals. Would you like to talk to any of them? Maybe then you can find out if they are baseless rumors or fact."

He had to stop to think about that. He doubted it would look good if he showed up and spoke to people who disliked Shido, got tangled in their web of drama, and his superiors caught wind of it. But he

needed that article published. He had to at least try. “If you tell me their names, I’ll try and do some digging.”

However, after she listed off several names, he had to stop her. “Wait…I heard that some of them had died?”

“Oh.” Fuuka typed something into her computer. “Oh, yes, it seems so. Cause of death is listed as a heart-attack for…all those who died?” More tapping filled the stunned silence. “It seems that the living ones just quit their jobs for some reason…”

Were they murdered, then effectively covered-up? Why would Shido murder anyone just because they didn’t agree with him or his views? Self-defense, maybe? Akihiko could understand that much, *if* that was the case, but a heart-attack was not self-defense. Regardless, it was odd that only a handful of them had died under the same circumstances while others only left their jobs. Why would Shido spare some but kill the others?

But something uneasy began to settle in his stomach. His partner a few years back had a supposed “heart-attack” on the job before he collapsed into the street and was hit by a car. Akihiko had thought he had been pushed by some gangbanger who was out for both of them. His partner was too young, too healthy, thus he always (and still does) believed something had *killed* him.

He shook his head, not willing to think about it when he had a mission to accomplish with Fuuka. “What else can you find?”

“It seems he had some interest in a science lab that shut down a few years back.”

…What the hell was happening? “Science?”

Fuuka continued to work in the background. “Yes. It doesn’t mention what kind of science, but it appears it was shut down when the main researcher…killed herself?”

He could feel the headache start to pound at the back of his eyes. “Why would Shido be interested in this lab?”

Suddenly, Fuuka gasped. “Wakaba Isshiki! Mitsuru has mentioned

her before!"

"What?!"

"You should talk to her. Her lab might have been a part of the Kirijo group!"

But, then…what did that *mean?* If it was a Kirijo funded lab, it would have been shadow related. So why would someone like Shido be sticking his nose into the lab's work? Was it just an interest or was it something he was hoping to *use* in the future? It likely wouldn't have been for the good of the people if Shido was swimming in complaints and scandals.

Was *that* the reason people who spoke against him were *dying?*

He shook his head. "I'll be sure to talk to her. Thank you." He ran a hand through his hair. "I wish there was something I could do to thank you."

He heard her giggle. "It's quite alright, Akihiko. Maybe if I ever venture out into Tokyo, you and Minako can show me Akihabara. And I could meet Makoto!"

He had forgotten how *nice* it was to talk to someone about the good things in life. "We could arrange that if you give us fair warning."

"If I'm ever close enough for business, I'll let you know!"

"I really do appreciate this, Fuuka."

"I'm always willing to help!"

A few minutes later, after thanking her at least ten more times, they both said their farewells and he ended the call. He leaned back in his seat and stretched out his neck. He had been sitting for far too long and he really needed to put this research aside and get out of his mind for an hour or two. He was drowning in the information she had offered him, but he didn't know what to do with it all. It was like there were a million voices speaking to him, but he couldn't understand a single word…

He stiffened when he felt hands working over his shoulders. “Oh, relax. I’m not going to bite you.”

Why did everyone keep telling him that? Because they *would* ? Why would someone *bite* someone else? Minako moved her arms to cross over his chest and rested her head in the crook of his neck. “I thought you were still suspended.”

He snorted at her. “Doesn’t mean crime stops.”

“ *You* should stop every now and then,” she whispered in his ear as she circled around him to sit on his lap, her arms still wrapped around him. “You’re tired.”

He was, but his mind was firing on all cylinders. He was pretty sure she could tell that from his inability to *sit still* . He *really* needed to get out. “I need to get out and clear my head.”

Her smile spread over her face as she rested her head on his. “Or, you could stay here and do the same.”

One day, he was going to be able to *not* blush at a comment like that with the seductive tone she used like he was a twenty-three-year-old guy. It didn’t help that she laughed at him in that sweet and non-insulting way that always made him burn with embarrassment. “S-Stop it.”

She ignored him, went for the kill strike, and kissed him. He wanted to get out of the apartment so he didn’t bother her with his weird energy, but when he felt her hands working at the buttons of his shirt, he thought it wouldn’t matter *where* he was as long as his brain stopped *working*.

“I don’t think I’ll sleep well in a chair, Minako,” he told her once she pulled away, her lips lightly lingering on his.

“Then don’t fall asleep.”

His laugh caught in his throat when she was able to slide her hands onto his shoulders and move the shirt off of him. “We’re getting too old for this.”

She smacked him on the chest. “Sounds like someone’s afraid to admit he’s out of shape after two weeks off work.”

He should have known better than to try and stop her.

She giggled at him, *again* , then gave him a soft kiss on the lips. “But Makoto will be coming home any minute now and I haven’t started cooking dinner.” The moment she was off of him, he groaned and cursed under his breath.

“What was that, honey?”

He was never going to see the day when he would *not* be flustered around her. Never. Even when he was *dead* . “Nothing.”

He looked up at her when he heard the door click shut. That look was back on her face and he didn’t know if he should remind her that Makoto was coming home or if he should just keep his mouth shut for once and let her do what she (and he, really) wanted.

Minako held out her hands instead of throwing herself on him like he was anticipating. He didn’t know which option he liked better. “You need to get some sleep.”

To his complete surprise, Minako pulled him off the chair when he reached out to grab her hands, guided him to the bed, then moved to sit behind him before he had the chance to lean in and kiss her. She wrapped her arms around his neck and slowly lowered him onto her lap, her hands brushing through his hair as she smiled down at him.

“Get some sleep.”

The light brushing of her fingertips over his scalp was a method she liked to use to calm him and force him to sleep. “I thought you had dinner to cook?”

She closed her eyes and gave off a breathless laugh. “You’re my priority right now. I can always send Makoto out to get something if I have to.”

He made himself more comfortable, then he reached up and cupped

her cheek with his hand. “If you get out of bed, I’m going to wake up.”

She leaned into his hand and lifted her own to cover his. “Then I guess I’m not getting up.”

He never checked the clock before she was able to put him to sleep, so he had no idea how long he slept for. When his eyes opened, Minako was still there, a book in her hands that he had *no* idea where it came from unless she got up. And, she was under the blankets *beside* him. When she noticed he was looking at her, she smiled at him with warm eyes and leaned over to brush some of his hair back.

“Good morning handsome.”

He sat up a little *too* fast and he had to wait a second for his vision to clear. “Morning?”

She kissed him. “You *were* tired.”

How the hell had he slept through the evening without waking up once? He frantically searched for the clock by their bed and sure enough, the bright red digital lines told him it was a little before seven.

Did he really sleep for over twelve hours? Or was this a prank Minako devised in his sleep? “Makoto’s pretty upset with you for sleeping instead of taking her out to the gym.”

He hung his head. “Why didn’t you wake me up?”

Her hands landed on his shoulders as she massaged some of the tension in his muscles. “I told her you were tired and you needed your rest if you were going to be strong enough to fight back.” She chuckled. “That might be why she was upset, since you slept through a chance for her to finally beat you.”

A smile tugged at his lips. “I hope so.”

Minako pecked him on the cheek, then shuffled off the bed. “Now get up. You got enough rest for one day.” His hesitation did *not* go

unnoticed. He felt the color rise to his face before he could do anything to stop it. “Oh? Not feeling so old now, huh?”

He frowned with a blush as Minako wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed herself against him. He had to place his hands behind him to support her added weight. “I wasn’t feeling old to begin with!”

Minako squeezed him tightly before pulling away. “Then get out there and do something. Or I can entertain whatever it was you were thinking about.”

He was quick to throw himself from the bed, change into something casual, and walk out the door before Minako’s burning stare kept him home for the rest of the day.

The only problem was, he didn’t know what to do. He walked around the neighborhood for a few minutes just to gather his thoughts. He felt rested for the first time in months, but he still couldn’t believe he had slept through an entire night. He hoped Makoto wasn’t really upset with him and that Minako wasn’t trying to make him feel better.

He still had to suffer through the weekend before he would be allowed to go back to work. How had thirty years passed in a blink of an eye, but two *weeks* were dragging on forever?

He stopped in his place. Makoto was going to be eighteen in a week. His little girl wouldn’t be his little girl anymore. She would technically be an *adult* . She was going to be graduating next year. She would leave the apartment next year. She would move on with her life and find a stable career and a boyfriend and…

He shook his head. For the next year, Makoto would still be his little girl. If some boy really thought he stood a chance, he would push him out, tell him to come back in a year, then probably get an earful from Minako. But…wasn’t that what a father should do? To come in and intimidate any potential boys who wanted his daughter? He didn’t get that chance with Sae before she up and left.

Back then, it wasn’t the idea of his first daughter with a boy that had plagued his mind at night so much as it was if she was even alive…

Why the hell was he *thinking* like this? The thought of Makoto with a *boyfriend* was hard enough to swallow.

Akihiko decided to focus his energy on his current investigation, as it was still fresh in his mind. After all, the more information he could supply to Ohya about Shido, the more willing she would be to publish that article on Kamoshida. So he reached for his phone in his pocket and slid through his contacts until he found Mitsuru's name.

She picked up the *second* time he called her, which made him realize she was likely busy and wouldn't be able to answer his questions. "Yes?"

So he wouldn't waste any more of her time. "I need to talk to you about something that's come up. Is there a good time you could meet with me?"

"Is everything alright?" The concern in her voice made him worry that he had spoken with more urgency than he probably should have.

"Everything's fine, sorry. I just know you're busy and I don't want to waste your time."

She sighed on the other end. "Fuuka told me you spoke to her."

Maybe he didn't need to meet with her then? "Oh." Or was he not allowed to talk to any of her team since *he* wasn't part of it?

Another sigh reached his ears. "I need a drink. I'll meet you at the usual."

He didn't want to say it out loud, but, he could use a drink too, and it was only mid-afternoon...

He waited for Mitsuru at Shinjuku Station, not because she needed him to show her the way, or needed help pushing past pestering club promoters. It was just a habit. That and he had no idea how long he was going to have to wait for her, failing to ask her over the phone *where* she was coming from. He didn't keep in contact with her every day, but he knew enough about her work that she could

be halfway across the country without him knowing.

He spent an hour walking around inside the station, his eyes scanning some pieces of jewelry that he thought Minako might like to have. Or some *healthier* sweets both Minako and Makoto would enjoy. He thankfully wasn't an impulse buyer, so he was able to walk away before any salespeople approached him and convinced him to give in and buy something.

However, when he walked out of the station, something caught his attention. It was small, and he had no idea how he had managed to see it, but right inside a bookstore, he saw a cover of a children's book.

Buchimaru's Excellent Adventures!

He had read the book to Makoto years ago when she first started her obsession, but Makoto had taken it to school with her and misplaced it. She said it had been stolen (but when he asked her again to tell the truth, she said she didn't know what happened to it) and he promised her while she cried on his lap that if he saw it again, he would buy it for her.

But did she really need all of this? She wasn't a child anymore, as much as he wanted to keep her one. How would she react to getting a children's book on her birthday because he remembered a silly promise that she probably forgot about? How many Buchimaru themed trinkets and toys did she need from him before they lost their meaning? Should he even buy her the book? Should he buy it and give it to her and then find something different for her birthday?

His body moved on its own, bought the book before he could change his mind, and made his way to the station. He would look for something else for her birthday. He *did* promise her he would buy it, and he might not be proud of a lot in his life, but he did his best to uphold his promises.

Right after he stepped outside, his phone buzzed in his pocket. It was a short message from Mitsuru telling him that she had stepped off the train and would meet him at the bar. He pocketed his device and stepped out into the street and made his way to his destination.

Akihiko waited for her outside of the bar, but when he caught a glimpse of her, she looked more tired than she had sounded over the phone. He suddenly felt guilty asking her to come out this way.

She sensed the question on his tongue and held up a hand to stop him from asking it. “I’m fine. But you owe me a drink.”

He nodded and held the door for her and stepped in right behind her. There was a grin forming on Lala’s face, and it made him extremely uncomfortable, remembering that she knew he was *married* . But she gave a warm smile to Mitsuru and poured a glass of whatever the hell she had asked for (he wasn’t a drinker, but he wasn’t surprised that Mitsuru would know about the fanciest liquors on the market…).

“The usual for you, honey?”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Um, sure.”

Then he heard a screech so loud he thought the glass bottles were going to shatter. “Is this your *wife?!”*

It was Ohya.

To make things even worse, Mitsuru turned to him. “You’re married?”

Ohya then thought it would be cute to throw herself at him. “Someone’s a *playa!”*

He not so gently pushed her off of him. “I am *not* . And she’s just a friend!”

“It’s okay, sweetie,” Lala chimed in with a laugh. “Your secret is safe with us.”

Akihiko groaned as he grabbed his drink sitting at the bar. He said nothing to the bartender or the reporter and took a seat in the back of the bar. Mitsuru eyed him curiously, but sat down in the booth across from him. “Mind telling me what that was all about?”

Her eyes widened slightly when he was the first to take a not-so-

small drink. “Lala knows that I’m married because she claims that she *knows* these things.”

“I do, sweetie.”

Mitsuru chuckled when he grabbed his drink again to cover up his embarrassment at being heard. “Anyone with eyes would be able to read your terrible attempts to cover it up.”

He threw his face into his hands. “No one has ever put me on the spot before.”

Mitsuru took a sip from her glass. “Lucky for you then.”

It wasn’t his intention, but he finished his drink off the next second. “Let’s talk about something else, alright?”

But then he felt a weight next to him and a hand pushed his empty drink out of the way and replaced it with a fresh one. “I’ll cover for you this time if you tell me who your wife is.”

He tried to scoot away from her, but Ohya clamped onto his arm with both of hers. Mitsuru thankfully came to his aid. “With all due respect, I don’t see how his personal life is any of your business.”

Ohya grew quiet next to him. “I think I know you…”

“Most people do.”

Akihiko would have *loved* to see Mitsuru put this girl in her place, but Ohya sat up straight and released him. “Oh my god, you’re Mitsuru Kirijo!” She bolted out of her seat and he thought she was intimidated sitting across from *the* Mitsuru Kirijo and was going to leave them alone. However, after a minute passed, Ohya returned to the booth next to Mitsuru with a fresh drink in her hands.

“Oh my god I can’t believe I get to meet you in person! I have so many questions to ask you!”

Mitsuru looked over at him, but he reached for the glass in front of him. “Be careful what you tell her. She’s a reporter.”

There was a sense of realization that came to her face, but then she chuckled. “Going out of your way to speak to a reporter isn’t like you at all, Akihiko.”

Ohya completely ignored them and began bombarding Mitsuru with questions. “Where did you go to high school? How did you get your hair to look so beautiful?! How did you keep your youthful looks?! Are you going to have kids with this loser or do you have another man in mind?! Do you *have* kids?!”

He coughed into his fist. Mitsuru’s earlier comment reminded him why he was here. “I actually asked Mitsuru here so the two of us could discuss Shido. But I guess you’re welcome to join since you’re here.”

Ohya went quiet and rigid while Mitsuru glared at him from across the table. He tried to ignore her piercing glare. “So I’m hoping this is enough for you to write that article.”

The younger woman glanced over at him, all previous eagerness gone from her posture. She sat up in her seat and rested her arms on the table. “You work fast. And you have good friends. I’m jealous.”

Mitsuru, however, was still glaring at him. “You brought me out here to talk to a reporter on your behalf?”

“No,” he said as he lifted his hands. “I didn’t expect to run into her here. I swear.”

“So why even mention it at all?”

“Because this is *for her* .” He grabbed his drink, but kept it on the table. “This is my last option. I swear it wasn’t my intention to have you both here, but whatever information you were going to give me, I was going to give to her.”

Mitsuru slammed her palms onto the table. “You’re purposely going to leak information I would have *trusted* you with?!”

Ohya waved her hand in front of her and drew in Mitsuru’s attention. “Look, I know you don’t trust me, but whatever is said in this

discussion is not for a paper, or an article, or anything but for finding my friend." Her eyes landed on him. " *Your* article must mean a lot to you."

He fell back against the seat. "I need him gone, and this is the last way I can think to do that."

Mitsuru's eyes hardened on him, but she chose not to speak. Ohya let the silence drag on for several uncomfortable seconds before she pushed herself out of the booth. "I'll write your article. Send me what information you have about him, case files, your personal report, whatever, and I'll work on writing it." She slid a business card across the table. "We can meet up later to discuss Shido, assuming your *wife* doesn't kill you first."

Then Ohya walked back up to the bar and took her usual seat. He reached out and grabbed the business card she had given him, then quickly put the card into his pocket.

"Akihiko."

"I know you're pissed, alright? But what you don't understand is that this isn't a normal request. This isn't something I'm willing to let slip through my fingers. I *have* to do this!"

He gave himself a few seconds to calm down since his shouting had attracted attention from Lala and Ohya. Both of his hands ran through his hair before he planted his elbows on the table and threw his face into his hands. "If I do nothing, a teacher is going to keep harming those students. He's going to keep thinking he can get away with it."

"This is personal for you."

It was nice to know that the edge in Mitsuru's voice was gone, but there was still a hint of disappointment. "I tried to arrest him, but the brass told me it was a weak case and not worth the effort. But then…" His hands pulled at his hair. "But then this teacher attacked Makoto. He came into the police station that day and told me that he was going to *rape* her, and then he almost *did!* " He slammed his fists into the table. "So yeah, this is personal for me. I can't let him

hurt her again!"

Mitsuru crossed her arms. "I don't believe that was a good enough reason for you to assault him, Akihiko. But," she added when he opened his mouth to defend himself. "I can understand your decision to speak to the press. However, you should have *told* me about this beforehand."

"I'm sorry." He was suddenly exhausted, even though he had *several* hours of sleep that day. "I didn't expect to learn anything, but I thought Fuuka would find me *one* thing to bring to her." He reached for his drink and held it in the air. "Then she told me to speak to you, and here we are."

She brushed her hair out of her eyes before crossing her arms again. "I wish I had more to offer you, but at the moment, I'm afraid I don't have much. I did a little digging before I came out here, but the only thing I learned was that Shido isn't in any of my records."

Oh. "But Fuuka told me that he had something to do with that lab."

"I did not know much about her, but Isshiki was not one to speak of her work outside the lab, and she was not one to welcome many outsiders, myself included. We worked with her lab for a few years based on the field of science she was researching because I was interested." She finally made a move for her own glass. "Her lab focused on human cognition, but as it failed to produce any reason to believe it could be related to the Dark Hour, I didn't see the need to remain informed on their results. We cut ties years before the lab shut down."

"Did you know she killed herself?"

Mitsuru sighed as she returned the glass to the table. "I heard, yes. But the investigation report came back with no evidence of foul play." She narrowed her eyes at him. "Why are you diving into this anyway?"

He crossed his arms over his chest. "Because I feel like there's something *missing* . People who had connections to Shido are dying from heart-attacks. My *partner* died the same way. There has to be

a connection somewhere, but I don't know-,"

"I worry about you, Akihiko."

That came out of nowhere. "What?"

"You're becoming more aggressive, more impulsive, and nothing that you're investigating now has anything to do with your district."

He frowned at her. "I can't just turn my back on people who need-,"

Her hand cut him off. "I know you love your family, but you're drowning again. I will have some of my operatives investigate Shido and *I* will speak to the reporter if need be. *You* focus on your job rather than a million different ways to bury yourself."

She grabbed her drink and prepared to leave the table, but he stopped her. "I would do anything for my children. You know that. Even if I have to lose myself in the process."

Mitsuru sighed and shook her head. "I don't think you realize how much you would destroy them if anything happened to you."

He couldn't stop his chuckle. "Sae would be elated, I'm sure."

But then Mitsuru gave him a sad look that froze him in his place. "You've fallen farther than I thought if you think that your death would bring any sort of joy to your daughter."

She left him sitting in the booth with his half-finished drink, clutching the bag with Makoto's book in it.

Chapter 20

Chapter 20

Sakura-san never made a point to ask him questions about his life, but that morning, he looked up from his paper as he came down the stairs.

“Read an interesting article this morning.”

Ren thought little of it and sat down at his seat to dive into his curry breakfast. He *really* needed to learn how to make this. “Oh.”

But Sakura-san lowered the paper and gave him a questioning look. “Claims a teacher is beating the students at your school.”

Ren choked on his meal. “Wh- *What?”*

The older man handed him the paper and Ren quickly flipped through it to find the article he had been talking about. Sure enough, he saw the names *Kamoshida* and *Shujin Academy* a few paragraphs down from the top of the page.

Morgana hopped up onto the seat next to him, startling Sakura-san. “Oh, this isn’t good. Who wrote it?”

Ren’s eyes found the author. *Ichiko Ohya* . “I don’t even know who this is.”

But as he read through it, he worried about where the information would have come from.

Ryuji .

But…why would he speak to a reporter *now* about something that happened a year ago? Was it about his broken leg? Did Ryuji not think they were making good enough progress in the castle and thought this would make things better?

Ren reminded himself on his way to the station that it could have

been a number of people. Ann was a model at one point, right? Maybe she had connections to the reporter? How many other students were tired of no one caring about Kamoshida's abuse and they took it upon themselves to make it public?

He was glad he ran into Ryuji outside of school or he may have given his peers more of a reason to fear him. Despite the ever-growing list of possible whistleblowers, Ren felt Ryuji was the one with the most motive. "What the hell, Ryuji?"

The blond lowered his phone and took a step back. "W-What? I'm here on time today, dude!"

"Did you speak to that reporter?"

Morgana hopped out of his bag. "This is only going to infuriate Kamoshida and he's going to tighten his security in the palace."

"Woah, woah, I have no idea what you're talkin' about man."

When Ryuji went back to his phone, Ren grabbed his wrist. "Kamoshida broke your leg and nothing was done. So did you think it was smart to go and speak to someone who would publish your word in a paper?"

Ryuji pulled his arm out of his hand with a growing scowl. "The hell is wrong with you? Why do you think *I* did it?"

Morgana sighed on his shoulder. "Look, it doesn't matter now. We just need to be prepared for when we go into his palace again. He's still going to be in rough shape, so we need to take care of this soon."

His friend pumped a fist in the air. "Hell yeah! I wish I could shake the hand of the person who crushed him!"

Ren took a step towards him to quiet Ryuji. "Some *cop* apparently beat him half to death. So keep your voice down or they will do the same to you."

But there was a sparkle in Ryuji's eyes when he turned to him. "Oh shit man, maybe it was Sanada! Aha, good for him! That would have

been a sight to see!”

Ren exchanged a look with Morgana. “Sanada?”

“Yeah, dude. He’s super awesome and is trying hard as hell to get Kamoshida out of school and into a prison cell!”

“It sounds like he would rather put him in a *grave* , Ryuji,” Ren added with a glare. “How would you even know it could be him?”

Ryuji’s smirk made him feel uneasy. “’Cause he’s been training me and shit. Knows all about fighting. Apparently, he was a boxer in high school! I looked him up after he told me that and he was super good! Undefeated even! And he’s a cop, so I’m sure it was him!”

“You shouldn’t be so *proud* of that.”

Morgana pushed himself up on Ren’s shoulder. “Does he know that girl, too?”

The blond gave Morgana a look, but then Ren asked again. “Does he know Niijima-senpai?”

His question startled Ryuji. “The Prez?!” Ren nodded his head, waiting for some sort of answer, but Ryuji only shook his head. “Are you for real?”

He didn’t know if he should tell Ryuji *how* he might know that, so he tried to keep it simple. “Morgana overheard Kamoshida say that her ‘cop friend’ had put him in the hospital.”

“Oh.” Ryuji scratched the side of his head. “Then maybe it wasn’t him. He’s never mentioned knowing her or nothing.”

Despite telling himself that it could have been *two* different people, something told him it was the same guy. “Did he know about your broken leg?”

His friend kicked at the ground. “Yeah. I called him the day it happened and he showed up. Not even where he was supposed to be, and the guy comes right out. He did all he could for me when no one would even bother to help. Oh!” Ryuji suddenly began fiddling

around on his phone. “You should totally meet him. He’s super cool and I bet he would do something about that record of yours!”

As much as Ren would *love* to be free again, it wasn’t something he figured would go away over the year. “It’s fine. I doubt there would be much anyone could do. I’ve accepted it.”

Ryuji clapped him on the shoulder. “Nah nah, he would do something.”

Yeah, put the guy who did this to me in a coma… “Really, it’s okay.”

“Dude loves beef bowl man. We should go after we go to the palace!”

Ren sighed heavily, knowing that there was likely no talking Ryuji out of his plan. So he nodded to him. As they both walked the rest of the way to school, Morgana lowered himself into his school bag. “If he’s a cop, he would make a good ally. Given that what we are doing will likely draw their attention.”

He turned to tell Morgana quietly, “Yeah, and then he’s going to turn us in.”

“There’s no harm in at least *meeting* him.”

Which was how he managed to find himself sitting at a booth in the beef bowl shop after an exhausting trip to Kamoshida’s palace. Ryuji had at least offered to cover his bill, and he was grateful for it. Morgana pouted next to him, stuck between his leg and the wall. “I want to eat, too!”

Ryuji laughed as he grabbed his glass of water. “Pretty sure beef bowl ain’t for cats.”

Morgana hopped up on Ren’s lap. “What was that?”

“I thought I saw a sign that said, ‘No Pets Allowed’.”

Ren froze in his seat as Morgana jumped back into his place. However, when Ren looked up at the man standing beside their table, his eyes widened in surprise. “I saw you the other day…”

He gave him an equally confused look while Ryuji's eyes went back and forth between the two of them. "You two know each other?"

The man shook his head and sat down across from Ryuji. "I didn't think I would be seeing you again."

Ren tried to remember that this guy was a friend of his friend and that he was *not* one of the bad cops that didn't believe him back home. "I-It's nice to meet you."

"Wait, the hell?!" Ryuji continued to turn and look at both of them. "When the hell did you two meet?!"

He almost told Ryuji it wasn't a big deal, but then the man spoke for him. "I ran into him outside the principal's office the other day."

His friend elbowed him in the side, something that did not go unnoticed by the guy sitting across from them. "Dude, I told ya he's doing all he can!"

The man cleared his throat the next second. "I don't mean to ask this so suddenly, but…is that *your* cat?"

Great. He was breaking the rules and now a *cop* was going to throw him in jail. However, to his horror, Morgana placed his two front paws on the table. Ryuji leaned over the table to push him back down, but from the corner of his eyes, he saw the man stare back at them in shock.

"Knows how to be an 'effin show off, that's for sure."

Ren desperately tried to think of something to say, but Ryuji's friend sighed heavily. "A black cat with a bright yellow collar…"

Ren and Ryuji spared each other a look before the blond groaned and asked, "The cat get into any *trouble?"*

Morgana quickly came to his own defense. "Hey!"

But the man's gray eyes met his. "Is it your cat?"

This was how he was going to go back to prison? Because of a *cat?*

“Y-Yes…”

A gloved hand wiped across his face. “Then you saved Makoto…”

Both Ren and Ryuji (and Morgana) gasped at his statement. “So you *do* know the Prez!”

The older man rubbed his face with both hands. “She was reporting back to me about Kamoshida’s abuse. Then she told me she was… she was cornered by him the other day…”

Something clicked in his head. “Did you go to the press with her information?”

But Ryuji cut in with his own question. “Dude, did you beat the shit out of Kamoshida?!”

“Yeah, to both of your questions.” Ren grabbed at his pants as an outlet for his anger. Why did this guy think it was fine to not only beat the hell out of Kamoshida, but then infuriate the man even more by asking for a slam page to be published?

The question finally became too hard for him to hold in. “Why?”

Ryuji must have sensed something in his tone and quickly spoke up. “We should have a competition to see who can eat the most beef bowls!”

However, the older man held his stare with one of his own. “Do you have something or someone you wish to protect?”

The question knocked Ren off balance. His reaction must have been evident on his face as the friend shook his head. “I’m a cop. It’s my job to protect people. And when I can’t *do* anything to help, I get frustrated. I failed helping Sakamoto. I’m failing to help those students. I had to do something, even if it may not have been the *best* move.”

He felt Morgana place a paw on his thigh, but he ignored him. “So it’s okay to put the man in the hospital? That was why he went after Niijima-senpai. Because he was angry with *you* .”

Something flashed over the man's face, but he blinked and it was gone. "You must be the transfer student."

He had not been ready for that. Ryuji, finally figuring the tension was gone, threw his arm around Ren's shoulders. "Hell yeah! Met this kid on day one! Got a lot to show him in this big ass city!"

"I wouldn't have made Sakamoto my first choice of friends…"

Ren *almost* cracked a smile, but he was still trying to figure the guy out. Ryuji, however, slapped the table with his hands and shouted, "C'mon man! I'm a great friend!"

For the most part of their dinner, Ryuji kept the conversations focused around how he had met the both of them, how his adult friend could school him not only by running faster but by consuming more beef bowls than him. But Ren finally had his moment alone when Ryuji's phone rang and his friend told him it would be rude to take the call at the table.

Did he want to speak to Ren, too?

The moment Ryuji bolted for the door, his eyes met his again. "I'm assuming you have reservations about me."

Ren took a deep breath. He wasn't glaring at Ren, but he was still quite intimidating. "How do you know Niijima-senpai?"

He chuckled. "That's your first question?"

He moved on his list. "Why did you harm Kamoshida?"

The man across from him folded his arms over his chest. "He came at me first."

Because *that* justified putting Kamoshida in the hospital… "Why did you speak to the media?"

He turned his head, likely checking for Ryuji, then he faced him again. "I tried to arrest Kamoshida back when Sakamoto first got injured. But thanks to his behavior, it was denied. Then I heard about what happened to Makoto, and I could only imagine what was

happening to other students. Your principal tells me that Kamoshida is an upstanding citizen, a great coach and teacher. It's only natural to see bruised and broken students in volleyball." He sighed heavily. "I did what I did because no one else cared to listen. This was the only other thing I could think of to *help* ."

Hearing his tone made Ren feel like he was the bad guy for asking. He didn't agree with his methods, but one thing stood out to him while he listened to him talk. He was *trying* . When one thing didn't work out, he tried something else. He wouldn't be kept down.

Nor would Morgana, apparently. "He's a good guy, Ren. You should trust him. I sense something about him."

The man leaned back in his seat when Morgana popped up into his view. "Is…Is he trying to *say* something?"

He could see Morgana smiling at the guy, but Ren shook his head. "He likes attention."

"Did…Did you know he was going to attack Makoto?"

Ren pushed Morgana back into the space he had been sitting in, but it took him longer than he thought to answer the man's question. "Is she the one you want to protect?"

He never got an answer as Ryuji came back to his seat. "Whew! God my mom can talk my ear off when she wants me to pick somethin' up for her." He then turned to Ren with a grin. "You guys talk smack about me while I was gone?"

Ren tried not to grin back. "Yeah, that's all we did."

He was slightly impressed that when the bill dropped onto their table, Ryuji's friend reached out and grabbed it. "Consider it a small thanks for helping, and a small apology for putting you both through hell with Kamoshida."

Ryuji sank lower in his seat. "Hey man, you ain't gotta keep doin' that to yourself. We'll take care of him, don't worry."

That sparked Ren's attention. He kicked at Ryuji under the table and

gave him a look to keep him from saying anything else. However, Ryuji's friend noticed it and gave them both a questioning stare. "You'll take care of him?"

Ryuji thankfully kept quiet and rubbed the back of his head. Ren decided to break the tension and pushed Ryuji out of his seat, making sure to grab the bag by his side. "I never introduced myself to you. I'm Ren Amamiya."

There was a hesitant look in the man's eyes that made Ren worry that he knew what he was doing. But he shook his head and also came to his feet. He extended a hand to Ren. "Akihiko Sanada."

"Well, thank you for dinner, Sanada-san," he said as he shook the man's hand. "And I'll do my best to keep Ryuji here out of trouble."

The older man chuckled at him as he grabbed his jacket hanging from the side of the booth. "Yeah, good luck with that." He then walked off to pay their tab, but just when he thought he was in the clear, Sanada turned back around. "Stay out of trouble. *Both* of you."

On his way to his line after parting ways with Ryuji, Morgana pushed himself out of his bag. "He has the power, Ren."

He came to a stop in the middle of the walkway. "What?"

"That feeling I sensed while you guys were talking, it's the same feeling I had when I first met you."

Ren turned to the cat sitting in his bag. "He has a *persona?"*

Morgana nodded once. "I'm sure of it. And if he can fight well enough to put a man like Kamoshida in the hospital, he would make a great addition to the team!"

He shook his head. Was *that* the feeling he had when he first ran into Sanada at the school? "Look, this is already hard enough with Ryuji, and now Ann is involved. I would rather not bring more people into this mess."

"But he *has* one already, Ren!"

“So why couldn’t he understand you at dinner today?”

Morgana was quiet for a few minutes. “Well, I don’t know.”

He sighed as he began walking back towards his line. “I’ll keep it in mind, but I’d rather not ask him in case you’re feeling something different and he uses it against me.”

“He’s a good guy.” Ren thought as much as well, but there was still something he couldn’t put his finger on. He cared way too much about Niijima-senpai. He might have been a good cop, but then he brutally attacked a man over something he probably would never know about. Ryuji could vouch for him all he wanted, but until Ren was able to name that missing piece, he would have to keep his eye on the guy. His freedom was far too important to him and he knew better than to trust strangers he knew nothing about.

He slept rather well that night for how stiff his bed was. He was getting used to it, but sometimes he could still feel the edges poke through the mattress and he would wake up with a sore back. But he felt good when he woke up. Good enough to brush off Sakura-san’s glare and reminder he had better behave. Good enough to brush off the whispers that had come to be more background noise than anything. Good enough to make a quick detour to the third floor during his lunch break to give a proper thank you to Niijima-senpai for letting him sleep during lunch and the following period a few days ago.

He knocked once, but heard nothing, so he knocked again. Nothing. Curious, he slid the door open enough to poke his head through.

Niijima-senpai was sitting in her seat at the table, but what caught his attention was the book she held up to her face. He never saw the design before, but if he were to guess, it was a children’s book and not something he ever thought she would be into.

However, it was absolutely adorable. She was so drawn into the book and the illustrations that she never heard him approach. He even had to *cough* to get her attention. She jumped in her seat, the book slipping from her hands and onto the floor.

Ren bent down to pick it up as Niijima-senpai worked on catching her breath and he held it up to examine it. "I don't think this is required reading for class, is it?"

The blush that came to her face made his heart leap in his chest. She looked down at the table in front of her. "Um, n-no."

Ren handed her the book, hoping to ease some of her nervousness, even if a part of him was *dying* to keep poking her. "Looks interesting."

She met his eyes for a brief second before snatching the book from his hands. "I-Is there something I can help you with?"

He had known her for close to two weeks and he could tell he was forming a crush on her. "I never got to thank you for letting me crash the other day." He stood up straight, bowed deeply, and said, "Thank you, Niijima-senpai," before he lifted his head.

She reached under the table to smooth her skirt or dry her hands, one of the two, then nodded her head. "Y-You're welcome." She put the book into her bag, then realized he was still standing there. "Did you need something else?"

"I met Sanada-san last night."

If she had been standing, she probably would have fallen over. Ren actually thought she was going to fall out of her seat. Her eyes went wide and both of her hands shot up to her mouth. "What?!"

"He was really upset that he couldn't help you with Kamoshida."

She drew her shoulders back and took a deep breath. "There isn't a lot he can do now." When she looked back up at him, he saw something flash in her eyes. A spark of anger, maybe? "He didn't tell you anything else, did he?"

He knew there was something happening between the two of them that he didn't know about. Why else would Sanada have taken such an interest in her? "Well, he seems very eager to protect you."

He saw the same emotion flash across her face again. “He told you that?”

The room was becoming much too cold for him. “He brought you up a few times…”

He watched her in silence as she packed up her things and walked out of the room without looking back or saying another word to him. Ren continued to stand in the room, confused as to what had just happened.

Morgana must have thought much the same. “What was that all about?”

Ren, however, just shook his head. “I don’t know if I even want to know.”

Chapter 21

Chapter 21

Round number 2:

(PS: please don't mind any weird formatting issues. I see it a lot after italicized words and I don't have the patience to go and fix it all now 😩)

She was upset. Not angry. Not sad. But a perfect in the middle.

Which is why she felt justified when her closed fist connected with the side of her father's face.

Had he been anyone else, Makoto thought she would have knocked them off their feet.

He was clearly shocked, his hand quickly coming up to assess the damage. She felt a wave of insecurity wash over her when he pulled his hand away from his mouth and she noticed a smear of blood on his fingers. It had been stupid to lash out at him over something that had been eating her up for days. She immediately regretted it, clasped her hands in front of her, and looked away in shame.

"I thought I told you no face shots."

He used a rare, stern tone with her that she hadn't heard in years. It cut right through her, but she still couldn't lift her eyes to face him. "I'm sorry."

She could see him rubbing his injury with his hand, but then he turned to face her and sighed loudly. "Mind telling me why you're so pissed off then?"

While it was nice to see her dad anything but sad, she also didn't want to see him *angry* . Especially at her. She wanted to take a few steps away from him, run out of the gym, and hide in her room under her blankets until he wasn't so mad. It always worked when she was a kid and upset him.

"Makoto."

She tensed in her spot, but he left no room for arguments. Or escape. "I-I'm not-,"

"Look at me, Makoto."

She hadn't been this nervous around her father in so long. But she knew better than to ignore him, even if all she wanted to do was turn tail and run. She met his eyes and her entire body had to fight just to keep her frozen in place so she wouldn't start shaking in fear. "I-I'm sorry."

He wiped another few fingers over his mouth, gave her another hard look, then sighed. "We can talk about this once we get home."

He said nothing to her as he walked past her. A part of her wished he would put a hand on her shoulder and tell her, *"That was a great shot, but don't do it again,"* and pretend like nothing happened. But she also took it as the stab she needed to finally get the issue off her chest.

"Why can't you tell anyone that you're my father?"

She didn't need to be looking at him to know she struck something in him. "Is that why you hit me?"

Makoto bit her bottom lip to keep herself from shouting. While the gym that time of day wasn't overly crowded, it wasn't empty either. She didn't need to make a scene. Thankfully, her dad stepped closer to her so they could talk like normal people.

"I-I think I understand why Sis hates you."

She regretted her choice of words when he flinched, but she told herself she needed to continue if she was to undo the damage. "I

don't hate you. I just…I'm just starting to understand her thoughts, is all."

Her dad rubbed his face with both hands before he took a deep breath and exhaled. "Let's talk about this at home."

Makoto shook her head. "No. No, I don't want to." She was getting nervous, afraid that she was about to say the wrong thing in the heat of the moment. But she opened the wound. It was her responsibility to close it. "It's not fair that you can go around and tell people that you know me while I've been forced to lie to people my entire life and tell them you're dead."

She squeezed her eyes shut and she could feel her arms shaking as she clenched her hands into tight fists. "You told us you were so scared that a criminal would come after us and use us to get something from you." *Do not cry, Makoto.*"But then you're the one who's going out of his way to help me at every turn. You mention me to people who don't even know me very well. How do you know that a criminal won't find out about me when you go to great lengths to help me? How do you know that they *don't know?" Do not cry.* "What's the point of lying now if you don't *hide* behind it anymore?"

She opened her eyes and tilted her head back to keep the tears from falling. "You're a great dad when you think no one is looking. But sometimes, I feel like you don't want to be one any other time, and that's why Sis has so many problems with you."

Makoto closed her eyes again to try and gain control over her unstable emotions. She was proud of herself for saying what was on her mind ever since she found out her dad had mentioned her to Amamiya. She told herself it wasn't that big of a deal, but over the last few days, it had grown to consume her and she finally had the outlet she had been waiting for.

She felt a weight around her shoulders. Her eyes opened, a few tears fell, and her dad pulled her along by her shoulder. "Let's go sit down somewhere then."

There was something oddly calm about his voice, the way he held her with one arm, the way *he* was calm and not desperate to run

away from her. She really wasn't in the mood to eat, her stomach still suffering from all of the nerves, so she was impressed when he ushered her into the diner across from the beef bowl shop he frequented.

It was quiet inside as he sat down on the opposite side of the table. Her nerves kicked in high gear again, but her face must have scrunched or something because he gave off a light laugh. "You don't need to be so nervous to talk to me, Makoto."

He surprised her again when he ordered peppermint tea for her and black coffee for himself. As her fingers continued to pull at each other under the table, she at least lifted her head and thanked him. The two drinks were placed in front of them a few minutes later. It was nice to hold something in her hand, to focus on the warmth emanating from the cup, to smell the light aroma of the peppermint leaves. It all helped her relax.

Which she realized was exactly what her dad had been trying to do. "I'm sorry for hitting you."

He looked down at his own drink, but Makoto could see the concern swirling in his eyes. "I want you to tell me how you feel, even if it's not what I want to hear."

She held onto her cup tighter. "I-I don't want you to think I hate you."

A sad smile stretched over his face and Makoto worried she wasn't going to be able to heal the wound. "It's okay." He broke the silence by taking a drink. "Please, Makoto."

She loosened her grip on the cup in her hands so it wouldn't break. She brought the drink to her lips and took a sip, then another, before she brought it back down onto its plate. "I know things have changed since I was born, when Sis was born, and a part of me knows that it's too late to go back to the source and pretend it never happened." She took a deep breath without looking at him. "But sometimes I feel you're so determined to keep up the façade instead of coming out and telling people the truth just because it's what you've been doing for years. It's not necessary anymore, I think."

An exhale. “You act like you don’t want to get close to me in fear of someone hurting me, but then you’re okay making a scene when someone talks about me, or showing up at school to report something for me. Sometimes your fear of me getting hurt drives your desire to protect me and you don’t care about hiding beneath the lies that have consumed our family for years. Then other times, you use it as an excuse to keep me away from you. It’s confusing. And it’s starting to hurt more than I thought it would.”

She didn’t make eye contact with him as she focused on the edge of the table. Once she was done speaking, her hands went out of sight and she started scratching and clawing out of nervousness. She wanted to be brave and look at him, to see if he was even still *sitting* across from her, but she was too scared.

She felt like a hypocrite, asking *him* to be brave and stand up for his family while *she* couldn’t even make eye contact with him.

“I’m glad you’re telling me all of this, Makoto.”

Hearing his voice startled her and she was forced to look back up at him. He had crossed his arms over his chest, his head was leaning back on the wall behind his seat, and he had a remorseful expression on his face. She noticed that he couldn’t look at her, either.

But when he spoke, he was calm again. “When I held your sister in my arms for the first time, I didn’t think about how happy I was to be a father. I didn’t think about when she would take her first steps, when she would start talking, when she would call me ‘Dad’. The only thing I thought about was having a defenseless newborn child ripped away from me and your mother. It scared the hell out of me. I thought about all the people I had lost in my life, people I would have given my own life to bring back, and I refused to lose someone else I loved.”

He gave off a soft, but sad laugh as he titled his head towards the ceiling. “Your mother was furious with me. I know deep down she always will be. But I always thought it was the right decision. I always thought that no matter what, your sister would always see me as her father.”

His face hardened and his hands tightened into fists by his shoulders. “I ripped my own daughter’s life away from her the moment she was born. It was easy to forget about it when she was growing up, laughing and playing like any other child would. But I knew the second she asked me why she didn’t have my name that I was going to regret it for the rest of my life.”

He threw a hand over his face and into his hair and Makoto had a hard time fighting back her tears. “But I’m proud of her. She didn’t let my decision destroy her life. She fought through her anger and pushed herself to make something of her life. And for years, I fought to accept that she was never coming back, but your mother liked to remind me that I had another daughter that still loved me and needed me to be there.”

It wasn’t until he planted his elbows on the table and threw his face into his hands that Makoto lost the ability to keep her tears from falling. “And I haven’t been there for you, Makoto. Not *once* . Not until it was too late. I wanted nothing more than to try and be the father I couldn’t be for Sae, but I can’t. I keep telling myself I’m hiding behind this decision to keep you both safe. But it cost me one daughter and it could very easily cost me another. If I could go back and do it all over again, I would. I would fight for you and your sister. I would have kept you safe on my own. But it’s *too late. Nothing* I do now will make a damn difference.”

It took more strength than she thought it would to slide out of her seat and sit next to him. He pulled his hands away from his face to look at her in surprised confusion, but she didn’t see any tears. She buried her face into his chest the next second. “I love you, Dad. I will always love you.”

She felt him rest his head on top of hers as his arms wrapped around her. Neither one of them said anything, but she didn’t feel like they had to. Yes, she was upset with him for something that was now out of her control, but she could understand *why* he had done it. Even if she couldn’t, he was so miserable and had suffered way more than he should have. Either way, he was her dad, the one who always read her bedtime stories and kissed her goodnight. She would always love him for what he was *doing* , not for what he had *done* .

Her mother gave them a questioning look when they stepped inside the apartment after their outing, but her dad said he would talk to her about it later. She rushed up to him when she saw the cut on his lip, to which Makoto immediately confessed to punching him in the face.

“She almost knocked me over,” her dad said, a smile on his face, and a hand on her head. “I think she’s getting pretty close to being able to beat me.”

But when she finished getting ready for bed, she went into the living room to speak to her dad. “I-I know this might sound really childish, but...” She felt the nerves again, but for a different reason. “Will you read me a story?”

He looked so surprised that she would ask that she was sure the room warmed a degree thanks to her blush. But she wanted to let her dad know that she wasn’t angry with him like her sister was. That she didn’t hate him the way her sister did. She would always be his little girl. And as childish as it was to ask him to read her a bedtime story, she thought it would make him happy again.

When she had the courage to look back up, both her mother and her father were smiling at her. Her mom kissed him on the cheek before she stood up from the couch and walked up to her and hugged her tightly and lightly kissed her head.

“Thank you, Makoto,” she whispered in her ear before she walked down the hall to her own room.

She felt like a kid again when her dad sat next to her on her bed, one of the several Buchimaru plushies he had gotten her over the years locked in her arms. He had a warm smile on his face when he asked her what book she wanted him to read, then she grabbed the book he had given to her the other day and handed it to him.

“You remembered your promise.”

She began to feel like she shouldn’t have said it, that she shouldn’t have asked him to read to her when she was going to be eighteen in a few days. But then his face lit up and he laughed, pulled her in for a hug, and kissed the top of her head.

“I didn’t think you would remember that.”

She rested her head on his chest as he opened the book up in front of them. “Mom says you always keep your promises.”

His chest shook under her ear and her smile widened. “You and your mother talk about me behind my back?”

She gave him a light slap and he started to read the book. It was extremely childish, having him read a book meant for five-year-old kids, a book she could have read on her own. But she didn’t pay attention to the words as much as she listened to his voice, the way he had his arms draped over her, the measured breaths he would take once he finished a page.

“Will you make another promise to me, Dad?” she asked once he had finished reading.

She watched him set the book down on the nightstand by her bed. “Of course.”

She pushed off of his chest so she could look up at him. “Promise me that you’ll keep fighting. Because I’ll always love you, Dad, and I know Mom will always love you, too.”

There was a flash of surprise in his eyes, followed by regret, sorrow, then finally, pride. “You’re growing up, Makoto.”

To hide her flushed cheeks at his praise, she slammed her head into his chest. “You didn’t promise.”

A hand brushed through the back of her hair and she felt him lean down to place another kiss on her head. “I promise, Makoto.”

She allowed him to tuck her in like she was five, carefully placing her Buchimaru under the blankets in the space beside her. She chuckled at him as he wished the animal a goodnight, then kissed her forehead.

“Sometimes, I wish you could stay my little girl forever.”

She smiled at him while he brushed a few strands of hair off her

face. “Then I’ll promise to always be your little girl.”

He laughed at her. “You’re not so little now.”

“But no matter how big I get, I want to stay your little girl.”

She sat up to wrap her arms around his neck when he just sat there with tears building in his eyes. He hugged her back a little too tight, but she let him. “Promise me, Makoto.”

She sniffed into his shoulder. “I promise, Dad.”

Chapter 22

Chapter 22

Akihiko could honestly say that things were starting to look up again.

He had been so nervous when Makoto had come out and told him how she really felt after years of keeping things bottled up, but she didn't stomp her foot and scream at him and vow to hate him forever like her sister had. In fact, Makoto had been very understanding of his feelings and told him that while she had been upset, she still loved him. It was a moment of pride, watching his little girl turn into a woman, and it had lifted an enormous burden off of his chest.

She wasn't Sae.

Makoto would always love him.

Regardless of if Makoto knew it or not, the conversation made him feel better, stronger, and more determined than ever to patch things up with her sister.

He wouldn't run from Sae again, even if she cornered him and threatened to strangle him with a look. It was nice to know how Makoto had felt. Now, he had a better idea of how to speak to Sae.

It was still incredibly difficult, but right before the end of April, he steeled himself and went to talk to her.

It had been an incredibly boring day (week really) at work, since his bosses still kept him glued to his desk under mountains of paperwork. But he was back to work. He was getting into a routine again. He was able to check up on what he had missed while he had been suspended. The paperwork really told him nothing, but the friendly conversations of his peers is what kept him from losing his mind.

So once he had left for the day, he walked across the street to the courthouse to speak to his daughter.

Akihiko had been inside the courthouse several times, testified for the prosecution frequently, so his presence wasn't anything people stopped to wonder about. He climbed up the stairs and to the prosecution's hall, but that was when he started to get nervous. He didn't have a real reason to be there. If someone were to stop him and ask him why he was there, he needed a reason to come smoothly off the tongue or he would likely get escorted out.

But, something even more bizarre happened. He ran into a less familiar face. "Akechi-kun?"

The young teenage detective turned to him in surprise, but then a calm and relaxed smile came across his face. "Ah, Sanada-san. I wasn't expecting to see you here."

"I wasn't expecting to see you either." He took a step towards the boy. "What are you doing here?"

Akechi appeared to brush something off of his uniform coat before that unnerving smile was back. "I'm assisting Sae-san with some cases."

Akihiko stared at him in confusion. Why the hell would Sae ask for a teenager's help with her cases? He knew better than to assume she would ask him, but an actual detective would have been a better choice over a *child* . One that never seemed to stop *bragging* on live television.

Akihiko fought in high school for others. To grow strong enough to protect them. He didn't do it for the fame, the girls, any potential scholarship. Akechi, however, was the exact opposite. And it irritated him immensely.

"Shouldn't you be in school?"

Akechi's gloved hand pushed some hair behind his ear. "I assure you, Sanada-san, that I take my studies very seriously. This is simply an opportunity to put my knowledge to use to help people around me."

Akihiko had a retort on his tongue, but he kept it to himself. "I see."

The teen looked down at his wristwatch, then nodded to him. “But it is getting late. I’ll be heading home for the evening.” He bowed. “Farewell, Sanada-san.”

He watched the boy turn the corner out of sight before he sighed. So Sae could talk to everyone *except* for him? Was she really that pissed off that she wouldn’t even ask him for *help?*

“No you wouldn’t.”

Did she really think that he would let her suffer alone if no one was willing to be there for her? Is that why she turned her attention to a *teenager?*

“What the hell are you doing here?”

Sae’s voice startled him, but his fear began crawling up in his chest and squeezing his lungs when he turned to find her glaring at him. She looked like she was about to head home, but she also looked so *tired* . He knew the job was demanding and frustrating, but it was different to see it on someone he loved rather than in his own reflection.

But he came here with a purpose. He wouldn’t run from her again. “You’ve enlisted the help of Goro Akechi?”

Her glare turned into something more murderous. “He’s actually quite perceptive and brings a fresh set of eyes to cases I need solved.”

Well, she hadn’t punched him or started screaming at him yet, so he kept things focused on work. “What kind of cases are you working on?”

“That’s none of your business.”

Sae made a move to get around him, but he stood in front of her to keep her from leaving. “If you needed help, all you had to do was ask.” He held up a hand to stop her from speaking. “I’m a cop, Sae. It’s my job to help you and your team.”

There was a hint of understanding in her eyes, but when she

blinked, it was gone and the anger flared back to life. “You work with special victims. You’re not the cop I need to help me.”

“There’s nothing in my job description that prevents me from reaching out to other units if they need extra help.”

Sae folded her arms over her chest, a single finger drumming on her forearm. “What would you know?”

He didn’t want to smile in case Sae took it the wrong way. “I might know more than you think.”

When she sighed, his fear vanished and an overwhelming amount of joy spread through his body. “What do you know about the mental shutdown cases?”

He felt something unsettling forming in the pit of his stomach, but he ignored it. Sae was opening up to him, asking him for *his* help. “I haven’t heard much. Other than that normal people are acting abnormally and no one knows why.”

“Yes, that’s right. You know *nothing* .”

He managed to snap himself out his surprise and grab her arm before she walked off. “Sae, let me help you. There hasn’t been a lot happening at work, so I can spend some time-,”

She shook him off. “I will do this on my own, with people *I* deem appropriate to help. I *will* solve these cases *without your* help! I *will* get that promotion and prove my worth as a *Niijima* .”

Something unnerved him about her shouting. “Sae, you don’t have to *prove* anything to me. I already *know* .”

She took one step away from him, then he put a hand on her shoulder to reach out to her one more time. “I know you’re angry with me. I get that. But don’t let your anger be your motivation or you’ll end up doing everything for the wrong reasons.”

Again, she turned and his hand fell to his side. “And you would be an expert in doing everything for the wrong reasons, wouldn’t you?”

He didn't head home right away, worried that Minako would ask what had happened and he wouldn't be able to tell her. He found himself sitting at his desk, avoiding the curious looks from the other cops, but it wasn't something he *never* did. It was a good way for him to clear his mind, collect his thoughts on paper or his computer, and have the access he needed in case he wanted to look something up.

He was getting worried he was biting off more than he could chew. He had his own district and his own men to worry about. Then he was keeping an eye on Kamoshida. It was hard to do, since Ryuji had been strangely avoiding him and Makoto had been steering clear of the man, thankfully. Then he had Kaneshiro, which was still not working in his favor, even with a first name. Add into his growing array of criminals a *politician* and he was swimming in some pretty rough waters.

Is that why Sae didn't think he could help? Because he had enough on his plate? He still had to go home, be a husband and a father, so his days were booked.

Is that what Mitsuru had meant when she told him he was *drowning?*

But he wanted to help her, whether or not Sae accepted it.

Akihiko started simply by typing in "mental shutdowns." A few hits came up on the screen, but one immediately stood out to him.

The subway accident. The one he had chosen to ignore to rush home and speak to Makoto. He pulled it up and read the report, learning that the conductor had accelerated the train, which eventually caused the derailment. The man had a few marks on his record, but nothing that would have led Akihiko to believe he would be at the forefront of a terrorist attack.

What had been his motivation to crash the train into the platform? Was it an accident, but someone above him had made him a scapegoat? Had he been in a depression, or on drugs, or both, and that had been why he crashed the train? It was hard to believe that the conductor would have created mass chaos just because he *wanted* to. Several people had been hospitalized, other trains

suspended service or had limited service, and many people were demanding that action be taken.

Then he learned it wasn't the *only* one. A second accident had happened only a few weeks ago, right before he assaulted Kamoshida. It was a similar event; the train conductor forcibly accelerated the train, which had then crashed into the platform, injuring several people both in and off the train. The public outrage had eventually forced the Minister of Transportation to leave his position.

But as he read through the reports and interrogation files, something bothered him. The worst part about each case was that neither of the conductors had known *why* they did it. They had both made similar statements to police, stating that they "blacked out" and came to again when they were arrested. A lack of motive was extremely bizarre in most of the cases he had worked on, and neither of the men had a criminal history of violence. Hell, the worst thing on the second conductor's record had been a parking ticket he refused to pay until he was summoned for court.

Regardless, the reports made it sound like these men thought they were *victims* rather than the instigators. While there was no evidence to support their claims, Akihiko had read enough testimonies from criminals to be able to pick one out without speaking to one.

He shook his head. Regardless of the truth, the fiction, the strange circumstances, it still didn't explain *why* . Why was this happening? Why did they happen relatively close together? Why use the subway lines and why use those specific conductors and not anyone one else? Why hadn't there been another derailment since the Minister of Transportation resigned? *Was* there going to be another one?

He could easily see why Sae would get so worked up over this. He had glanced at it for an hour and was already getting a migraine. He needed to go home. He needed to sleep. He needed to step away from this mind-numbing confusion that would likely haunt him for days to come.

Akihiko gathered up his things and turned off his computer. The next

second, however, there was a commotion outside of his office, followed by an angry shout he had heard before.

“The hell do you think this is, huh? That bastard can’t keep me in a coma so *this* is his next resort?! I am going to *sue the shit* out of him!”

As if his headache wasn’t bad enough, he threw his jacket over his shoulder and walked out into the lobby. When Kamoshida’s eyes found him, two uniformed officers had to hold the man back before he lunged at him.

“You think this is funny, you little shit?!”

First of all, he hadn’t been to the school all week once he realized Ryuji was giving him the cold shoulder. Secondly, while he was touched by Kamoshida’s desire to fight a second round, he also *really* wanted to get home.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Kamoshida wrestled out of the cops’ grip, then slammed something on one of the nearby desks. “You’ve crossed paths with me for the last time, Sanada. I’ll see to it that you never work another day in this city!”

Akihiko sighed. “Knock yourself out.”

The man made another move at him, but the nearby policemen circled around him and stopped him. He pointed a finger at him with the most intimidating glare he could muster. Akihiko tried not to smirk. A pathetic juvenile wannabe drug dealer could be more intimidating than this piece of work in front of him.

“You’ll regret this.”

The second he was gone, his thoughts went to Makoto. He was going to go after her. Whether or not Kamoshida knew Makoto was his daughter or not, he knew she was a weakness. If he was able to break Ryuji’s leg, he didn’t want to think about what he could do to his daughter when he was in a rage.

“The hell is this?”

One of the officers held up a card, bigger than a business card, maybe the size of a normal framed picture. Akihiko grew curious and approached him and asked to see it for himself.

He read it once.

He read it again.

He read it a third, fourth, fifth time…

What the hell was this?

Sadly, Akihiko knew what this was.

A threat.

It was childish. Each letter was a cutout of a newspaper or a magazine. *Steal away those desires?* How the hell was someone going to steal away something that they couldn’t *physically* steal? Then have him *confess?* Akihiko would have thought that suffering from a *concussion* would have been a more logical method to draw out a confession. All this damn card would do was irritate a man who was unstable enough as it was and force him to hurt more people.

Tomorrow, huh?

As much as Akihiko wanted to bring this man down, *this* wasn’t how it would happen. But, for shits and giggles, maybe he would show up at the school and volunteer to defend him from a kid or two who wanted to beat him up for once.

Something hit him like lightning.

Ryuji.

The card was him, one hundred percent. He could practically *hear* his voice when he read the card another time. Was this *his* doing? Was this why he had been avoiding him? Was he planning on gathering an army of angry students and attack a teacher after school? Was his show of violence supposed to be the “change of

heart” that was stated on the card?

As much as he wanted to take the card with him, he knew he better not. Evidence. Evidence that if he walked out with would make him look guilty. He settled for a few pictures instead, handed it to one of the other officers, then walked out of the station.

Once he was far enough away, he pulled out his phone and examined the pictures again. He had tried to file an official arrest against Kamoshida and had been denied. He had tried to settle the matter with the principal and was given the cold shoulder. He even went as far as to try and *kill* the man. Yet, Kamoshida kept coming back, more vile than the first time, more angry, more destructive, and more threatening.

As he put away his phone and started walking again, he told himself he didn’t care how it happened. He *needed* Kamoshida removed from the school. And if these “Phantom Thieves” could do something he could not, he would gladly support them however he could.

Chapter 23

Chapter 23

Makoto had been hearing rumors for a few weeks now that they eventually faded into wordless whispers. The group of congregating and excited students in front of the bulletin board interested her, though. They hadn't had their first round of exams, so what would they be looking at?

"Suguru Kamoshida, the utter bastard of lust."

That made her stop in her place.

She tried to get a closer look at what the students were gaping at, but thanks to her relatively small height, she couldn't make out much. When she went to excuse herself to push through the students blocking her way, every single one of them stood up straight and went silent. It was terrifying enough that she blended into the small crowd as they served a small shield of protection.

"What the hell is this?"

Makoto wished for once in her life that she was much smaller. Most of the students around her probably thought along the same lines. Kamoshida read some sort of warning or threat out loud, his voice rising with every sentence. He ripped something off the wall, a card maybe, and held it up in the air.

"Who the hell wrote this?" His eyes started scanning through the students before him. Makoto actually thought it would be best to step out and head down the hall. It was dumb. Her movement caught his attention. He pushed aside the few kids in his way and grabbed her wrist painfully.

"This is an outrage, Niijima-san! I demand to know who would write such slander and I want them expelled *now!"*

His hand tightened around her wrist to the point she thought he was

going to break it. “I-I don’t know who did it.”

“Then *find out!”* She winced when he pulled on her arm. He then leaned in close enough to her face that their noses were a fraction of a centimeter apart. His voice was low, but his tone vibrated in her soul. “If I find out you had anything to do with this or that article someone wrote about me-,”

“Let her go.”

While she doubted Kamoshida would attack her (or anyone) in front of a group of peers, his grip on her wrist begged to differ. However, when Amamiya approached the both of them, the crowd of students quickly took several steps back. Amamiya grabbed his arm, then he exchanged a look with Kamoshida that made Makoto momentarily forget about the pain.

Kamoshida released her and grabbed Amamiya’s jacket lapels, almost picking the boy off the ground. “Was it you, you little shit? You want to get expelled *now?”*

Amamiya surprisingly didn’t lose his glare, which she thought to some extent, worried Kamoshida. “Don’t touch her.”

It was very unusual to have someone other than her family come to her defense. She took pride in being able to defend herself, perhaps a little *too* much pride. She couldn’t tell as she placed her hand on Kamoshida’s arm if she had been touched by his actions or insulted by them.

“This is enough.” Both men looked at her, but Amamiya’s features softened to the point his lips turned into a frown. “Kamoshida-san, I will do my best to look into this.”

The older man tossed Amamiya away from him, but the boy caught himself before he tumbled over. He then turned to her and pointed a finger in her face. “I hope you remember what happens when you cross me.”

Like she had forgotten.

Kamoshida took off down the hall and the surrounding students

scattered to their respective classes in his wake. She took a deep breath to steady her erratic heartbeat, then she turned to where Amamiya stood.

“I do appreciate the sentiment, but he wasn’t going to harm me in front of other people.”

His face fell for half a second. He sighed and he became slightly more neutral. “I didn’t mean to offend you.”

She realized she was probably glaring, even if she told herself she wasn’t, but her mom liked to tell her she was either frowning or smiling. She didn’t have an in-between. “Do you know anything about this?”

That was when she actually *saw* what had set Kamoshida off. He read the thing aloud, but it was different to *hear* it rather than *read* it. The threat itself had sounded menacing, unrealistic, and ridiculous. Looking at the source, she now found the entire thing childish.

She pulled one of the black and red colored cards from the board and examined it herself. She couldn’t begin to imagine how long someone had spent making these. They were all clearly made by hand. Each letter had been cut out and pasted together to form a word. The back of the card (or the front) had a strange drawing of a face wearing a top hat. Was this the idea behind “the phantom”?

Artistic abilities or lack thereof aside, *why* did someone do this? What did they hope to accomplish by writing something so unbelievable and sticking it to the bulletin board for the school to see? *Stealing desires?* How did one *steal* a desire? And how was this supposed to make Kamoshida confess? All it *really* seemed to do was piss him off even more.

“It’s interesting, isn’t it?”

She was so wrapped up in her own mind that she forgot that Amamiya was around. Why hadn’t he gone off to class yet? She looked over at him as he plucked another card off the wall. “Why do you think someone would do this?”

Makoto turned her eyes back to the wall with the cards. She honestly didn't have a good answer for him. "Attention would be my best guess."

A faint trace of a smile tugged at his lips. "I think they got their wish then." She watched him examine the card, flipping it over a few times before he shrugged his shoulders. "I guess we will see what happens tomorrow, huh?"

There was something in the way he spoke that made her eye him curiously. "Nothing is going to happen. Nothing *has been* happening." She faced him fully and she could definitely tell she was glaring at him. "How do you think one foolish prank like this is going to do something that no one else has been able to stop?"

Amamiya crumpled the card between his fingers, lowered his head, and chuckled. "I promised you I would protect you."

Makoto was knocked back on her feet. "W-What?"

"You don't need to be afraid of him anymore." His eyes found hers and she was too drawn into his expression to look away. "A man only enjoys being a king until his subjects begin to rise against him."

He gave her a kind smile while her brain tried to comprehend what on *earth* he was talking about. The smile on his face curved into a playful grin and she didn't need a mirror to see the blush on her cheeks.

"Have a good day, Niijima-senpai."

She watched him walk away, still completely confused as to what had happened. He stopped briefly, the hand holding the card squeezing around the paper, then he tossed it into one of the trash bins.

She didn't see him after school that day, but she didn't wait around for him. She also chose to go home instead of stick around the school with an irate Kamoshida. Her mother was sitting on the living room couch when she got home. She turned to Makoto with a startled look, not expecting her home for at least another hour and a

half.

“What are you doing home?”

She dropped her bag on the couch before she sat down beside it. “I didn’t have any reason to stay. I promised Dad I would come home if I didn’t have student council meetings.”

Her mom gave her a questioning stare, to which Makoto looked away from. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

Her parents had been worrying over her for days now, ever since she told them about Kamoshida’s last attack. She couldn’t blame them, but she did know how to take care of herself. She wasn’t stupid. She learned from her past mistakes and wouldn’t make them again. Why did everyone think she was a weak and fragile girl?

“We’re just worried about you, Makoto.” Her mom spoke sadly and it hit her harder than she wanted to admit. “You didn’t tell us this teacher was harassing you until it became a physical attack. You scared the hell out of your father.” Makoto dropped her head. “I know you don’t want us to be treating you as if you’re a child, but what you don’t realize is that you are *our* child. We want to keep you safe.”

She took a deep breath, then released it. “I’m sorry.”

Her mom came to sit next to her, throwing her arm over her shoulders. “You have us both nervous since you seemed to handle the situation fairly well. So if you don’t want your father to know anything, you can tell me. Or you can talk to your sister.” Her mom held a hand to her chin. “Well, maybe not. Sae will probably go after the man, too.”

It got Makoto to smile at least. “Can I tell you something then?”

“Of course.”

Makoto took another deep breath, already knowing she was making a mistake. “Amamiya took me home that night that teacher attacked me.”

Sure enough, her mother reeled back in shock. “What?”

She had only told her parents that some black cat with a bright yellow collar had saved her, but that was the extent of her story. More so because her dad had been so *angry* and she doubted he would have listened anymore even if she would have continued.

But instead of feeling embarrassed or nervous, she actually felt… calm talking about him. She didn’t know why, but her voice remained steady as her mother continued to gape at her. “He was kind enough to make sure I was okay, then he walked me home so I didn’t have to be alone.”

“The transfer student, yes?”

Now Makoto started to feel the blush. “Y-Yes.”

But her mom didn’t start fangirling like a high school student whose crush just said they liked her. She instead gave Makoto a warm smile and a light kiss to the side of her head. “He seems like a very nice boy.”

Makoto didn’t dive into the rest of the story, choosing to keep his words of *“I’ll protect you”* to herself. “It seems that way.”

“I’m glad you have someone to look over you while you’re at school.”

Her cheeks started to burn. “M-Mom. Stop that!”

She kissed her head again. “Well, I was being serious, but it looks to me like you have a crush on this boy!”

That was when Makoto took a deep breath, hoping her blush would fade away. “I think he’s up to something at the school.” Her mom kept her smile on her face, but there was a subtle change in her eyes. A question, perhaps. Makoto didn’t give her a chance to ask it. “I think he’s going to attack this teacher.”

Her mother’s smile dropped into a small frown. “And you don’t want him to?”

If her dad couldn’t kill Kamoshida, she doubted a tiny little thing like

Amamiya would be able to scratch him. “I know that what Kamoshida has done and what he’s doing are horrible beyond words, but that doesn’t mean the right answer is violence.”

She sat in silence for what felt like hours, waiting for her mother to say something. She felt silly, because what *could* she say? What had words done for the past year now? *Nothing* . Kamoshida’s wrath had only gotten worse and extended to a variety of people. The volleyball players, boys and girls. Sakamoto. Amamiya. Takamaki. Her. Her dad. But no one seemed to care.

But, was meeting fists with fists really going to solve the problem or would it just hurt more people?

“You have a beautiful heart, Makoto.”

She snapped to attention at her mother’s words. “H-Huh?”

She smiled at her. “Your father finds the answer to these kinds of questions by throwing a punch. Even after all this man has done to you and to others, you want to find another way.” This time, her blush was *not* because of the boy she had brought up moments ago.

“However,” her mother continued, her gaze falling to her lap. “There has to come a point in time where enough is enough. From what I’ve gathered from listening to you, this boy doesn’t seem to be the type to rush into school with a weapon just to hurt people.”

Makoto left out the rumors that had flooded the school since Amamiya had started. “Well, no.”

A weak smile formed on her mom’s face. “Then maybe he knows what he’s doing.”

She kissed Makoto’s head once more before she stood up and walked into the kitchen. Did Amamiya know what he was doing? *Was* he going to do something? And if he was, *what?* Regardless of what her mother had said, she couldn’t picture Amamiya harming Kamoshida unless he *did* come in with a weapon. She knew very little about the boy, but that fear began to creep back into her heart.

What if he was a criminal?

What if he did have yakuza connections?

What if he didn't stop with Kamoshida?

It was hard for her to think about, let alone *picture* him in that light again. But after a quiet meal with her mom, she retreated to her room to think in peace.

It was a long night, an unusually long weekend, but she felt a jolt of energy when she saw Amamiya standing outside the gates of the school that Monday morning.

He looked up from his phone when she approached him. "Oh. Good morning, Niijima-senpai."

So many questions ran through her head and not a single one of them came out of her mouth. She instead walked past him and into the main lobby and took a second to catch her breath.

However, before she could reach the flight of stairs to head up to class, she heard a different set of whispers.

"Kamoshida didn't make it in today?"

"I hear he is really sick."

"Did the police finally arrest him after that article got out?"

"Do you think that crazed guy who attacked him the first time went back and finished him off?"

Makoto's mouth opened to defend her father, but she wisely closed it. She knew that her dad wouldn't go back after Kamoshida, unless he was provoked. He did come home pretty late the past few nights, but he always *came home* .

Her next thought went to Amamiya. Had he done something? Did he poison Kamoshida? Did he set his home on fire?

"Are you alright?"

She jumped in her place and covered her mouth with her hands

before the frightened squeak could escape. She turned to Amamiya, who had a small grin on his face. She didn't know if it was annoying or cute.

"Y-You startled me."

His grin widened. "You were pretty zoned out there, Senpai."

He had a light sparkle in his eyes, or the light from the hall was reflecting in them just the right way. Either way, it made her heart flutter and she had to look away from him. "I heard Kamoshida hasn't come in yet." It was odd for the man not to be early to school. It worried her to think about *why* he was always one of the first people to arrive, but she shook her head to clear the thoughts away.

Beside her, Amamiya shrugged his shoulders. "The trains can be a mess sometimes."

Despite herself, she found herself glaring at him. "He drives to school."

His lips parted and a breathless, "Oh," came out of his mouth. He appeared to be thinking of something else to say to her, but she didn't know if that was meant to keep her from interrogating him or if he was trying to piece together his thoughts himself.

She was staring at him for too long. He broke out into another grin that warmed her face. "Do you like what you see?"

Instead of answering him (she doubted she could anyway with how *hot* she was), she pulled her bag higher on her shoulder and walked off down the hall. She didn't make it too much farther before she heard a loud exclamation from the lobby.

"Everyone! I need to confess my crimes!"

Makoto immediately froze in her place, but she managed to turn her body enough to catch a glimpse of a *weeping* Kamoshida rushing into the hallway. "I must meet with the principal, and my team, and the entire school!"

She felt her heart thump loudly in her chest when his eyes met hers.

However, instead of the cold and angry glare she was so used to seeing from him, there was a tremendous amount of sorrow swirling in his eyes. She watched as he walked past several groups of students and he fell to his knees a few meters in front of her.

“I am so sorry for everything I have done. I abused my players. I asked for sexual favors from the girls just to have starting time. I am a horrible, pitiful human being!” The crowd around her gasped loudly, a whisper here and there broke out, but Makoto was zoned in on the man on the ground before her. “I will do whatever makes everyone happy! Even if that means taking my own life!”

Before she could find her voice, another broke out through the halls. “Kamoshida-san! What is the meaning of this?!”

But the man continued to cry on his knees. “I am guilty of the worst crimes known to man!”

The principal somehow managed to push through the students to stand beside the distraught teacher. He gave her a look, but Makoto refused to speak to him. While Kamoshida was the one who did all the damage, the principal’s hands were far from clean.

“You should live the rest of your life in the hell you’ve created for yourself.”

Makoto didn’t even notice that Takamaki and Sakamoto had stepped into the middle of the circle. There was a scowl on both of the teens’ faces as Sakamoto added, “It ain’t fair to your victims if you run away. They sure as hell couldn’t.”

Kamoshida wiped an arm over his face, then he slowly came to his feet. When he spoke, it was hushed and full of so much regret that Makoto felt her stomach turn. “You’re right. I can never apologize enough for what I’ve done, but I will not take the easy way out.” The man inhaled as he stood up straight. “I will turn myself in to the police at once.”

The two blondes gave each other a look, then nodded. Once Kamoshida had walked past them, they both turned to her, narrowed their eyes, and walked off. She was caught off guard by their stares,

but before she could make sense of it, the principal jumped into her face.

“What happened? Why did Kamoshida say all of this nonsense?”

Her mouth opened to offer an angry remark, but that was when her eyes caught Amamiya. He was leaning back against the wall, arms crossed over his chest, and that pleased *grin* stretching over his lips. She muttered a quiet, “I don’t know,” to the principal before she walked around him through the staring eyes of her peers.

But when she reached where Amamiya had been standing, he was gone.

Chapter 24

Chapter 24

Akihiko leaned back in his chair, pen tapping away on his desk, while he aimlessly browsed the weekly crime report for his area. He trusted his team, but it wasn't the same as actually being able to leave his office and walk around the district himself. He was annoyed that the higher ups were still chaining him to his desk until they deemed him "fit for work", but at the same time, it was nice to know that he wasn't always needed on the clock.

But seriously, where the hell did all of the paperwork come from?

He half-assed reading through the report, knowing it was the same old story. A few yakuza members masquerading as stubborn hosts or bar owners had been arrested. Small time gangs of teenagers were brought in for a day in the holding cell before they hopefully had learned their lesson and were released into the custody of their hysterical parents. Typical things.

But just as he was about to push the folder aside, something caught his attention.

A young male had been arrested trafficking drugs in Kabukicho. Nothing unusual, but at one point in the interrogation, the kid had offered up a plea. A slap on the wrist for a bigger catch.

Juyna Kaneshiro.

Akihiko quickly wrote down the name of the high school dropout and where he could find him. It was a long shot, seeing as the young adult in custody had already been denied a deal by the prosecution, but he would take any little detail he could get. Maybe he could talk to Sae about cutting the kid some slack if he offered up any useful information. He grabbed his jacket from the back of his chair and made his way out of the office, deciding to use the lunch break to his advantage.

Unfortunately for him, he didn't make it very far before someone walked into the station. The air was sucked out his lungs, out of the room, and all he could do was stand there frozen in place.

Which was a good thing, he reminded himself. One wrong word would likely cost him his job. It didn't stop him from narrowing his eyes and clenching his teeth, practically spitting at the man in front of him.

"What are you doing here?"

He expected Kamoshida to lift his head with a grin, tell him Makoto was *dead* , but he did the exact opposite. Kamoshida's hands covered his face and the man started to cry. He wasn't buying the act, but it was an unwelcome surprise. It got much worse when Kamoshida dropped to his knees, his forearms smacking against the floor, his sobs shaking his entire body.

"I must confess all of my sins! I am here to turn myself in to you, Sanada-san!"

Akihiko wanted to walk up to the man and yank him to his feet. Where was all of this coming from? Why the hell did he come into the police station and want to turn himself in instead of trying to push him over the edge again? Nothing about the scene made sense. A prideful and angry man crying in shame because he *finally* realized how horrible he was?

No. Something much larger, and more dangerous, was going on.

"Stand up." Two of his men flanked his side, then he gave them the nod to approach Kamoshida, who was slowly coming to his feet.

After wiping his face to be more presentable, his eyes locked with Akihiko. "I must pay for what I've done. Please, I will tell you everything."

Akihiko had dealt with Kamoshida long enough to know his personality. It only took him one look into the man's eyes to realize he wasn't dealing with Kamoshida at all. He was a completely different person, so overcome with grief and guilt and it was too

much for him to take. While it literally rattled Akihiko to the core, he shook it off and spoke to the men who stood beside Kamoshida.

“Take him to a room. I’ll talk to him in a minute.”

For the next several minutes, Akihiko sat behind his desk again, dumbstruck. An arrogant and vile man he had wanted to arrest for over a year had literally changed overnight. He remembered Kamoshida showing up a few nights back, slamming that odd and cursed looking card onto the desk. He was *furious* , shaking his finger at him and telling him he would regret it. Then, he shows up and wants to confess his crimes a few days later?

He would have thought it to be a joke, but Kamoshida’s countenance was anything but funny. Droopy shoulders, uncontrollable sobs, lifeless eyes…he really looked to be in serious pain.

Was he blackmailed? Did he *kill* someone and it hadn’t been his intention? Did someone come in and slap him around and now he felt insecure? (He doubted that, seeing that putting the man in the hospital himself didn’t do a damn thing.)

The more questions he asked himself as to where Kamoshida’s change had come from, the more he realized he didn’t have a good answer. He looked at the picture he took of the card Kamoshida had brought in, but it didn’t make much sense to him either. He might have believed Ryuji had created it, but how did he get a man like Kamoshida to turn himself in? There was no way.

He sighed deeply and rubbed at his eyes. He didn’t have enough facts at the moment, so he needed to see what Kamoshida could tell him. One of the police officers from earlier led him down the maze of hallways to the interrogation room they had placed Kamoshida in. The teacher still had his face in his palms. His shoulders shook as he continued to cry. It was enough of a sight that Akihiko’s mind went blank for a few seconds.

How was this possible?

He shook his head and turned to the cop. “I need someone to

interview him with me." He was on his last strike, so to prevent him from doing anything stupid, he needed someone in the room with him. While the cop went to retrieve someone, he again took in Kamoshida's appearance.

It was enough of a numbing sight that he walked back out of the room. This was more than blackmail. This was more like some mysterious force had ripped Kamoshida out of his body and left a shell of a man behind…

Is this what the card meant by *stealing away desires?*

Akihiko only stepped back into the room when a fellow detective arrived. He wanted to do most of the talking, something his partner had no qualms about, but Akihiko knew he had to be careful. Kamoshida could still be up to something.

The scraping of his metal chair is what pulled Kamoshida's face out from his hands. "You've picked an interesting time to come speak to me." He was still cautious around Kamoshida, waiting for him to come out and start laughing like a mad-man and tell him that there was a reason behind his visit. And not a good one.

"I want to confess my crimes." Akihiko actually *hurt* hearing Kamoshida's voice. The man looked back at him almost as if he were a ghost. "Please. It's the only way to make things right."

Kamoshida then met his eyes again and began to speak without being prompted to. "When I came back from the Olympics, I wanted everyone to know how great I was. When Shujin hired me, I couldn't wait to coach the sport I had loved my entire life. However, no one seemed interested in joining a volleyball club. No matter how many times I asked the principal or the student council president, their answers were always the same."

Akihiko grabbed at the fabric of his pants to keep his hands from reaching out and strangling Kamoshida for mentioning his daughter. The spark of anger, however, slowly faded away as he listened to how *sad* and *pathetic* Kamoshida's voice sounded.

"In order to get my club, I kicked out the track coach and did all I

could to get those boys to quit. But they were all so diligent. They all stuck together, no matter what kind of hell I put them through."

Akihiko grabbed his own notepad from his pocket. "And then you provoked Sakamoto?"

Kamoshida nodded. "Yes. I found out that his father was a deadbeat alcoholic. It only took a few words to get him to come unstuck."

"Did you defend yourself against him?" his partner asked, pen stopping on the pad. "Your earlier report said you claimed self-defense."

"I managed to get behind him and catch him under the arms, but then I…" Kamoshida trailed off as he threw his hands over his face. "I broke his leg. Intentionally. Brought my own leg down over his own until I heard the snap. I wanted to show the team what I could do to them, so I took Sakamoto's future away from him."

It was hard enough to hear the truth, but it was that much harder hearing it from a man who was crying. Akihiko gave him a few moments, but then he cleared his throat. "What happened after that?"

"The volleyball members weren't taking the game as seriously as they needed to be, as *I* needed them to be." Kamoshida sniffed a few times, then added, "A few players were good, but not good enough."

His partner asked, "How did you address their shortcomings?"

"I punished them." Another round of sobs came over Kamoshida. "I tortured them. I made them undergo grueling regiments with no breaks, no water, no speaking. And when they acted up, I would spike them with a volleyball, or I would use my own two hands."

Akihiko exchanged a glance with the other detective. "So you admit to abusing your players?"

Kamoshida nodded. "I do. I physically abused all of them. When the rumors began to surface, I started cornering and threatening those who were turning against me."

Akihiko had to bite his tongue before he asked if *Makoto* was one of the people he had threatened. But Kamoshida continued on. “I wanted the boys to fear me and I wanted the girls to *love* me. I threatened to bench my best female player if her best friend wouldn’t sleep with me, then when that didn’t work, I started abusing her, too. I planned on expelling a group of boys for trying to make my abuse public. I assaulted the student council president after our confrontation just so I could get back at you.”

He took a deep breath to give him time to clear his thoughts before he did something stupid. “Why are you telling us all of this now?”

Kamoshida’s head fell to his chest. “I don’t know. I just woke up the other morning with a terrible guilt in my heart and the only way I’ve been able to feel even the slightest bit better is by confessing.” He looked up at him with fat tears in his eyes. “Please. You must arrest me and lock me up. I’ve done terrible things. I wanted to get you fired because you annoyed me. I wanted to hurt those students because they didn’t respect me. Please.” He started to cry. “Please find me guilty. I deserve to rot in jail for the rest of my life.”

He watched Kamoshida weep in front of him like Akihiko had been a doctor announcing the death of a loved one. It made no sense, especially hearing the details of his abuse. He turned to the detective, who looked as confused as he was. Knowing he was the one in charge, Akihiko nodded to him and pushed his chair back.

“I’m going to ask the lab for some samples, just in case you’re under the influence of any drugs or alcohol.”

He knew he wasn’t drunk, and having busted enough drug dealers, he would like to think he would have known of a drug that could warp a personality like this. Maybe not. The drug world was not one he really wanted to jump into, so it could have been likely. It was why he had asked for the tests.

“I promise,” Kamoshida exclaimed through his tears. “I’m not on any drugs. I don’t drink. Please! Arrest me!”

Akihiko had to walk out of the room. Kamoshida continued to yell for his arrest and cry because he deserved it. When the door closed

behind him, he pressed himself against it and just let his thoughts run over each other until there was nothing.

“What the hell do you think happened to him?”

He sighed and pushed himself off the door. The closest thing he had ever seen that resembled whatever happened to Kamoshida had been back in high school, where more and more people lost their soul, their motivations, their *desires* . But if Apathy Syndrome had made a comeback, Kamoshida couldn’t have been the first unlucky case. Mitsuru would have told him otherwise…

Saying all of his thoughts to his partner, however, wasn’t something he was going to do. “I have no idea. The only logical thing is that someone drugged him or threatened him.”

His partner smirked at him. “And the *illogical?”*

Akihiko shook his head. “I don’t want to think about it.” He began to walk back down the hall when he stopped. Looking over his shoulder, he asked his partner, “What do *you* think happened?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “That was an odd card he brought in.”

“I don’t think the ‘odd card’ made him turn himself in.” …Even if weirder things had happened in his lifetime…

“No, but *someone* or *some people* did.”

Akihiko’s mind immediately went to Ryuji. He had a lot of dormant anger over his broken leg. He was always screaming and cursing when Kamoshida’s name was mentioned. But Ryuji wasn’t the type of kid to go find drugs and then use them on someone else. Ryuji also didn't have the heart to pull off blackmail. While the boy may have intimidated a few of his peers, a full-grown man like Kamoshida wouldn’t have been frightened over words.

“Can’t really say I’m all that upset over this.”

Akihiko snapped back to attention. “You really believe that card was what led to all of that?”

Was Amamiya involved too? Was that why he kept nudging Ryuji that day at the beef bowl shop? Was he trying to keep Ryuji under wraps so he wouldn't catch wind of their plan? But… *how* would two teenagers (and a cat) pull off something like this?

The other detective laughed as he passed him. "Let's just say that I'm a fan of these 'Phantom' people. Maybe they're cops from another city."

His laugh echoed throughout the halls, but Akihiko remained behind too lost in thought. If Ryuji and Amamiya and his cat were a part of this so-called 'Phantom' group that had made the card, how did they go about bringing Kamoshida to his knees? Both teens weren't a physical match for him. He knew enough about Ryuji to know there was no way he could have acted alone.

However, he knew next to nothing about Amamiya.

So, while he waited for the lab results, he decided to do a little digging.

He sat at his computer, his stomach tied in too many emotional knots that he denied going out for lunch with his co-workers. He knew Amamiya was a minor, so any information about him would be minimal at best. Minako liked to refer to him as the "transfer student", so if he could find out where he was transferring from, things could be a little bit easier.

For the most part, he learned that Amamiya was from a small coastal town outside of Odawara. He was going to be seventeen in September, had impressive marks from his previous schools, and sadly for him, didn't appear to be the type to cause trouble.

Then he saw the red flag.

Being able to access the police database, he was able to find that Amamiya had some kind of scuffle with the law recently and had a probation officer assigned to him. Akihiko's mind began to race again. He couldn't pull his record to see what kind of crime he was on probation for, but he *could* call up Fuuka and have her look it up for him. It was unethical for him to ask what Amamiya had done, but

if it was a serious offense, or worse yet, gang related, then it could lead to an explanation as to how he had managed to get Kamoshida to confess.

While Amamiya wasn't under investigation *right now* , Akihiko had a feeling that both he and Ryuji would be flying in a policeman's radar soon. Any help to eliminate them, he would take. He just hoped that it would *eliminate* them rather than cause suspicions.

He never knew how to tell Fuuka that he would be forever indebted to her for all of her help. She was quick to pick up the phone, even quicker to offer her assistance, and best of all, quick to do what he had asked.

"Well, it looks like Amamiya-kun was tried and convicted of… assault."

Not the kind of crime he expected to hear he had committed. "Do you know against who?" He hoped Fuuka would tell him it was a stupid scuffle between teenagers, shit that happened every other day on his watch, but some hot-head parent wanted Amamiya to pay the price. But as he waited in silence, his mind began to race. A juvenile being convicted of an assault wasn't all that common if the injured party only had a few cuts and bruises. An *assault* that landed a teenager a *probation* period *outside of their hometown* had to have been bloody and gruesome. A step down from *murder* .

He focused back on the conversation when Fuuka sighed into the phone. "Strange. No matter where I look, I can't find another name . "

Akihiko was not a computer person, or a techie individual, so he couldn't stop himself from asking, "Not at all?"

"Well," she started, her voice growing quiet. "Unless this boy fought a ghost, someone doesn't want to be involved."

"What does that even mean?"

"I'm only speculating here, but," she said with a pause. "He might have attacked a very powerful individual who didn't want their name

to get out. You know, in case it made them look bad or something."

It struck him as odd. Why would someone go through so much work to keep their name from a juvenile record? His brain was already starting to burn out, so he shook his head before the headache became stronger. "Is that the only thing on his record?"

Akihiko had been in the business long enough to know that unless Amamiya was a rare case, the boy was likely at the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong person. Fuuka only confirmed his theory. "Impressively, yes. Not one other complaint about him."

He flipped to a fresh piece of paper in his notebook. "Do you have a current address for him? I would like to talk to him."

"You seem to be very interested in this boy."

His pencil slid across the page. He coughed into his shoulder. "I'm trying to clear some unusual suspects from an ongoing investigation. I saw the record flagged in his file, but I couldn't get into it since I'm not his parole officer."

He left out that he was walking on thin ice already with his superiors and one last crack would send him plummeting into the frozen waters. "It's hard to describe since I don't personally know the boy, but he seems like a very good kid."

While Fuuka's admission couldn't be used as evidence that Amamiya did nothing wrong, it did make him feel like the boy was innocent. "He doesn't strike me as the type to hurt anyone. *You* could probably take him in a fight."

He heard the tapping of keys over the phone while Fuuka chuckled at his comment. "I don't believe you." A few seconds later, the clicking stopped. "He's currently living with a Sojiro Sakura, who owns a coffee shop in Yongen-Jaya."

Perfect.

His mornings could use a bit more caffeine.

Chapter 25

Chapter 25

Ren had been pushed to the max by so many different emotions in less than one week, he couldn't believe he was still *alive* .

The heart-pounding adrenaline rush while fighting with shadow Kamoshida had been the most intense ride of his life. Then the palace began to collapse, which kept his nerves firing on all cylinders for longer than he expected. At least he was able to sleep very well that night. Although they weren't in the clear yet, he had no nightmares about the slaves, his imminent expulsion, the *what-if's* Ryuji and Ann liked to ask him (since he was a veteran like Morgana…).

Then came Kamoshida's confession at the school. Weeks of tension had lifted off his chest and he was able to breathe for the first time since he had walked into that odd castle. He was grateful that Ann and Ryuji were the ones to verbally condemn Kamoshida to the life he had deserved. Ren simply enjoyed that warm feeling in his chest when he met Niijima-senpai's gaze and mentally told her, *"I told you I would protect you."*

He hit a brick wall when Ryuji brought him (and then *ditched* him) to the airsoft gun shop. The atmosphere was unbelievably stiff and nerve-wracking. He worried there were security cameras as he negotiated with the owner, who had a *resting face* that made his spine straighten. The man eyed him curiously as he dropped Kamoshida's Olympic medal onto the countertop, but the owner didn't ask questions. Ren, however, didn't have the courage to ask for more than what the man offered him in cash, so he thanked him, grabbed the money, and bolted before he fainted in the store.

It all flipped around when Ann showed them the way to the five-star buffet they were treating themselves to in celebration for bringing down Kamoshida. Ren couldn't tell if he was more impressed with the array of food or more impressed by how *luxurious* the place was.

He had never stepped foot into an establishment so bright with colors, expensive décor, adults walking around with clothes he would never afford in his lifetime. Regardless of Ann and Ryuji's excitement, Ren felt extremely out of place. It sadly kept him from being able to eat as much as his fellow companions could.

Ryuji had dropped a bomb on him during one of his breaks from eating. "We should keep going after guys like Kamoshida."

While Ren hadn't been against the idea, he had already dodged one bullet that could have sent him back to jail. The more people he went out of his way to help, the more likely he was to get caught. Plus, Kamoshida had been a *direct threat* . He didn't want to go out of his way just to find someone to gather up gold stars on his imaginary pinboard.

"There's gotta be more people out there sufferin' at the hands of people like Kamoshida!"

"I won't stand for it. We have to be the voice for all of those who need our help."

"You guys keep working together like this and *nothing* will stop you!"

They all agreed, but it wasn't until Morgana told them they *all* had to agree to change someone's heart that he felt a little better. He wanted to help people, he really did, but he also wanted to grow up. He wanted to go to college, to get a nice job, maybe think about settling down with a girl and having a family. He unconsciously went out of his way to help one person who ended up stealing some of that light from his future. So, he told himself he would do what he could, but he shouldn't feel bad for saying *no.*

Ren was thankful for the time limit on their stay or Ryuji and Ann would have never left. Two hours dealing with jumbled nerves and staring eyes made those two hours feel so much longer. The food he was able to eat was great, but curry in the comfort of a few friends would have been more to his taste.

Especially when he ran into a group of adults as they were leaving. They literally pushed Ryuji out of the way and stepped onto the

elevator like they owned the place. Ren saw their lips moving as they spoke, but his head was pounding and a high-pitched screech filled his ears. He had no idea where it had come from, why it came out of nowhere, or why it made him believe someone didn't want him to look at the group of adults Ryuji was screaming at right now.

Ryuji asked him if he was alright, but the second the men were gone, everything cleared up. He turned to his concerned friend and nodded. "I'm just really tired."

It wasn't a lie. He had been on pins and needles for so long that he just wanted one day to do *nothing* . He still had a full day of Golden Week, and he intended on using it to catch up on his sleep.

Sadly, Sojiro had asked him to help run the store in the morning after he came back from the celebration party. He couldn't refuse the man, so he nodded, walked up the stairs, and face planted into the bed.

He was up shortly before six and downstairs before Sojiro even showed up. The older man arrived a little after six, which Ren thought was the time he opened the store, but one glare was enough to keep him from asking why he was late. Ren had never been behind the bar, so Sojiro gave him the quick rundown and told him that he needed to help if he was going to earn his keep.

As much as he didn't want to admit it to the man, Ren was excited. He always loved learning new things. He had no idea how to make curry, no idea what even went *into* the dish, nor did he know anything about coffee other than it woke him up. Sojiro had a gift for creating both, and it was a talent Ren secretly wished he could learn.

Sojiro might think he was punishing him, but he was ready to learn. Plus, Ren thought it was a nice way to thank him for giving him a place to stay.

That morning was more of a disappointment for him. Sojiro didn't *teach* him how to make the coffee, pick the right beans to blend, how to know the right amount of sugar and/or cream to add to a specific customer's drink. Instead, Sojiro put him on dish duty and

told him to occasionally stir the simmering curry pot. He brought finished drinks to the customers that didn't sit at the counter. Basically, he was just his little errand boy.

The first hour was unbelievably slow. One person was all that came in, but he had been a regular. Sojiro was quick to make his drink before the man even sat down. But what struck Ren the most was that Sojiro never *spoke* to his customer. Just dropped off his drink, lit up a cigarette, then unfolded the newspaper and started reading.

The man looked over at him. "A new underling, huh?"

Ren didn't want to be rude and ignore him, but he didn't want to speak to him if that would offend Sojiro. So, he offered a weak smile and a quick nod of the head before he turned his attention back to the one plate he had cleaned seven times already.

The next hour was surprisingly different.

The sole customer had left a few minutes prior to the doorbell chiming as someone else walked in. Having his back to the door, Ren could only assume the person was a new face. He heard Sojiro put down the paper and ask what they wanted to drink.

But instead of the customer's answer, Ren heard Morgana's voice down by his feet. "Ren! It's that cop friend!"

Ren was thankful that the dish in his hand was under water or he probably would have dropped it and broke it. How the hell did he find out where he was staying? Well, the guy was a cop, so he assumed it wouldn't be hard. But *why* was he here? He surely didn't come all of this way just to have some of Sojiro's coffee (even if Ren would recommend the place, despite the coldness of the one who made it).

Ren slowly wiped his hands on the apron before he turned around. Sojiro stood at the coffee siphon, waiting for the dark, black liquid to drop into the cup underneath it. Sanada sat directly in front of Sojiro, his attention seemingly on the contraption and *not* on him. Maybe it was just a coincidence that he was there?

"It's rare to see someone using an old-fashioned coffee siphon, but

they always make the best coffee."

A small smirk formed on Sojiro's face. "Kids today are too into making it quick and easy. That crap they drink isn't coffee."

Ren was too awe-struck that Sojiro *spoke* that he missed the chuckle from Sanada. "I haven't had coffee from a siphon in *years* ."

The topic of coffee and a fellow enthusiast seemed to bring out Sojiro's voice. It was kind of nice hearing this stern and unhappy older man talk about something he liked to do with someone who liked to drink it. Even if some jabs about his generation were made, Ren felt most of his tension fade away watching the two of them talk like they had been old friends meeting up for the first time in years.

But then the bell rang and Sojiro turned his attention to the other guests. And shortly after he walked away, Sanada turned to him.

"I didn't expect you to be working here."

Okay, so maybe he wasn't aware that he lived *upstairs* and just got a part-time job instead of feeling obligated to help out. "I just started today."

Sanada took a drink from his cup. "Are you planning on learning his trade, then?" A small smile came to his face as he put the cup back down on the plate. "This is really good."

Ren took a few steps around the corner of the bar to stand behind the siphon. "That would be nice, but I don't know anything about this thing."

"So you got a part-time job just to wash dishes?"

His chest tightened and Ren knew there was a hidden implication in his question. But why would he be questioning his motives? Did he suspect him of doing something wrong and he needed to create an alibi? Did word get to him about Kamoshida's confession and he thought Ren had something to do with it? He silently cursed Ryuji for being far too comfortable around a *cop* .

"I hope not," was all Ren said before Sojiro pushed him out of the

way. He stood off to the side so he could watch Sojiro work. It was hard trying to focus on what Sojiro was doing when there was a piercing look from Sanada that made him very uncomfortable.

Sanada lifted the cup and Ren exhaled slowly. “This is really good.”

Sojiro nodded in response. “Can’t go back to that disgusting Starbucks crap now.”

When Sojiro took the two cups of coffee to the couple on the opposite end of the bar, Ren felt trapped again. To clear the stale air from his lungs, he chuckled. “Starbucks isn’t *that* bad.”

The man in front of him cracked another smile. “Yeah, that’s because you’re young and don’t know any better.”

Ren wanted to ask what he was doing there just so he would *know* , but he found a better way to ask. “How did you find this place?” Leblanc wasn’t a shop that would pop up on a search engine, nor was it in the heart of Tokyo. Someone had to go out of their way to come here. A coffee enthusiast he could easily see researching to find the best places for coffee, but a *cop* showing up where a *criminal* lived wasn’t so easily excusable.

“I know about your record.”

Well, he sure as hell didn’t expect Sanada to be so *blunt* . Ren literally fell back on his feet as if he had pushed him back into the wall. “W-What?”

He didn’t repeat himself. “And now Kamoshida has been arrested.”

Ren swallowed and glanced down at Morgana. “I heard about that.”

“Did you?” Ren didn’t know how to take the quiet, yet sharp way Sanada spoke to him. “What did you and Sakamoto do to him?”

His mouth was dry, but his insides were *boiling* . Did this mean he was here to *arrest* him? He didn’t show up for the coffee. He showed up because he *looked into him!* “How did you find out about my record?”

Sanada chuckled at him as he held his coffee cup in his hand. “I’m a *cop* , Amamiya. I can do a lot of things.”

Ren took another deep breath. He had to think of something to say to derail the conversation. He might have been able to worm his way out of uncomfortable chats with friends and family, but a *cop* was a different story. He was trained to look for the signs of nervousness and use that against people so they would *confess* .

“You don’t need to be so nervous.” The clink of ceramic on ceramic made Ren look back up. Sanada ran a hand over his face before he spoke again. “I’ve dealt with enough troubled youth and kids in gangs to know a bad kid when I see one. So either you’re very good at masking who you really are, or you’re just a boy who got caught up in something you couldn’t get out of.”

Ren tried to contain his relief since he didn’t know if this was a ploy to get him talking. But then Sanada leaned back in his chair and stretched out his neck. “You strike me as a good kid. Even if I know *why* you’re here. And to be honest, if you did have something to do with Kamoshida’s confession, you have my gratitude. I’m sure I’m not the only one.”

Ren finally found the strength to speak. “I don’t know what happened to Kamoshida.”

Sanada smirked at him and reached behind him for his wallet. “Well, then you tell whoever these ‘Phantom Thieves of Hearts’ are that they have my support.”

Ren couldn’t tell if he was sincere or setting a trap, so he kept his mouth shut as Sojiro came back over to collect his payment. “I expect you to be a regular now.”

Sanada thanked Sojiro for the coffee and grabbed his jacket from the back of the chair. He then turned to him again. “I’m glad Sakamoto has a good friend. Keep him out of trouble.”

All Ren could do was nod and watch him leave the store. Sojiro eyed him as he took a deep breath and released it. “You know him?”

“A little,” he replied. “He knows my friend at school.”

His answer clearly didn’t settle with Sojiro, but the man turned back to his customers. Ren turned back to the dishes to clear away some of his nervous energy.

Morgana sat by his feet. “You’re scared of him?”

“I’m not *scared* of him as much as I don’t know who he is or what he wants or why he was really here.”

“Maybe you should do some digging on him,” Morgana said quietly, hiding underneath the sink. “Maybe Ryuji knows something about him.”

Ren sighed. “I don’t want to *blackmail* him. He doesn’t seem like he wants to put me in jail, but I don’t want to fall for a trap he is setting up.”

“Nah, I told you he was a good guy! But it could help us even the playing field if you knew something about him since he knows about your record.”

He set one of the cups onto the drying rack beside him. “I’ll ask Ryuji at school then.”

He heard Morgana move to the other side of his feet. “Good. There’s something I want to show you guys tomorrow anyway!”

“And what’s that?”

He could hear the snicker in Morgana’s voice. “You’ll have to wait and find out.”

Chapter 26

Chapter 26

Akihiko didn't know what to make of his visit with Amamiya.

He was a good kid, but regardless of what the boy knew, Akihiko could tell he was nervous when he had asked about Kamoshida. Every little small detail he had picked up on. Did he have something to do with Kamoshida, or did he know who did? However, he didn't want to harass the kid or give him the wrong idea. Yes, he was a cop, and yes whoever brought about Kamoshida's bizarre state of mind probably did so illegally. But Akihiko had also stepped over that line before as well. But unlike this strange group, he couldn't stop him.

So, if Amamiya and Ryuji *did* do something to Kamoshida, he would do what he could to keep the investigation away from them.

He probably should have just told him that instead of hounding him like a criminal. The boy likely wouldn't come clean to a stranger, a *cop* , given the fact he had been convicted of a crime that Akihiko still wouldn't believe he could commit.

But that coffee was seriously worth all the hassle. Now he could work on ways to approach Amamiya without him shutting off and hiding. After all, the only way he managed to become personable with Ryuji had been over a common interest. With Amamiya working at Sakura-san's coffee shop, it could be that common interest he needed to get his foot in the door.

He walked through the doors into the police station, but it was oddly calm and quiet. He couldn't tell if that was because he had an interesting morning, a unique dose of caffeine in his blood, or if he missed some event and now everyone was upset with him.

Akihiko walked up to the first man he saw. "So, what's going on?"

The officer shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. The prosecution is

here and they brought the brass."

Suddenly, he could *feel* everyone's eyes on him as the silence began to wrap around his neck and squeeze. But what did their presence have to do with *him?* Were they here to formally arrest him over Kamoshida's assault? Were they here to arrest him for something else? Were they here to *accuse* him of something else?

His initial nervousness changed into aggravation as he made his way back to his office. His superiors may not have been happy about him avoiding an arrest (and thus, he got to keep his job) but he thought that ship had sailed. Perhaps with Kamoshida in custody they thought differently?

He only expected to see a total of three people in his office. However, he was greeted by twice as many people: two of his bosses, a politician he couldn't put a name to, the director of the Special Investigations Unit, Sae, and to add insult to injury, Goro Akechi.

He was the first to speak. "What the hell are you all doing here?"

One of the brass closed the door and gave him a hard stare. "You like to cause us trouble, don't you?"

His eyes found Sae, hoping she would say *something* to clue him in on why everyone was in his personal space. But her growing smirk only made him more uncomfortable. "I'm afraid we don't have time to deal with the theatrics, so let's cut to the chase." She stood up from her seat and took two steps to stand directly in front of him. "What did you do to Kamoshida *this* time?"

Akihiko tried to match her glare, but instead, he coughed out a laugh. " *This* time? I wasn't aware that I did anything."

The unknown politician stood up as well. "A man of your caliber has done a great many things for this community, but the people will not tolerate coercion by means of intimidation and fear."

The fact the man's name was on the tip of his tongue but he couldn't name him was going to drive him *nuts* . "With all due respect, I didn't

intimidate Kamoshida into confessing."

He thought that if Sae wasn't in the presence of important people, she would have slapped him across the face. "Says the man who nearly put him into a coma over a comment."

His reply was instant. "A comment that I'm assuming you knew was justifiable since you worked so hard to keep me out of prison."

The look on Sae's face nearly made him turn and walk out the door. In her deadly silence, his boss spoke up. "You got off lucky, Sanada. You were told to keep your distance, which you *did not do!"*

He shrugged his shoulders. "I can't help the fact that the man came into *my* headquarters and demanded *my* time so he could talk *to me.* "

He heard a deep sigh from the director. "Yet it seems you're missing the point." The old man came to his feet. "Kamoshida's confession will be thrown out and he will be released from prison."

Akihiko fell back on his feet. "W- *What?!"*

"You were warned to stay away from him and you chose to ignore us, Sanada!" He was also sure both of his superiors would have clubbed him if they were out in the streets. "You brutally attacked him, then he magically walks into *your house* and demands to confess? Do you realize how *ridiculous* this is?!"

He could feel his anger stirring in the pit of his stomach. "More *ridiculous* than ignoring the signs of abuse that all of *you* turned a blind eye to?"

"I swear to god, Sanada, if this is about that damn brat and his broken leg-,"

"First of all, he has a name," he interrupted, much to the annoyance of the rest of the room. "Secondly, I had someone else in the room with me that wrote the report you received since I knew you wouldn't trust my word alone. Thirdly, he tested negative for drugs and alcohol, and that was also included in the report. Lastly, I'm well aware of the consequences you have thrown on me, which is why I

asked for a second person to speak with him."

The room was quiet for a minute, until the politician spoke. "You've given the citizens a reason to despise the police force."

It took a hell of a lot of strength not to snap at the man. Sae added her own two cents. "I would have thought that after all of this so-called *trouble* I went through to help you that you would have learned your lesson."

"And all of you are giving the people a reason to *keep quiet!"* He clenched his hands by his side and took a deep breath to contain his rage. "The reason none of the students came to the police was because you looked at Sakamoto's assault and threw it aside because you didn't want to take the time to look into it. How many scared teenagers would have to walk through this building before you all realized that Kamoshida was a *problem?!* How many?!"

He paused again to reel in his anger. "I've worked with abused and troubled kids for half my life. Kids are not eager or even willing to speak to police about abuse. They think it's *their* fault. That's why Kamoshida never attacked any of the other teachers! He *exploited* these kids' weaknesses! And when Sakamoto's case went out the window, so did their courage to speak up. One case. That's all it took to silence that entire school!"

"There never was a second case reported."

"There never should have *been* a second one!" he snapped at the director. "But there were more than two, probably more than three, and all of you chose to ignore the evidence in front of you and side with a man like Kamoshida. It's no wonder they didn't come forward."

"Why is someone like you so interested in what happens behind Shujin's gates?"

Sae's question literally took the breath out of him. Her eyes narrowed at him, as if challenging him to tell them *the real reason* he invested so much time into Kamoshida. "Sakamoto never got the justice he deserved."

A small grin spread across her lips. “All of this for one troubled teenager?”

He had to look away from her. “If he went after one, he could have easily gone after someone else.”

“Shujin’s principal said you dropped by for a not-so-friendly chat over an alleged attack on a female student.”

Akihiko could feel the walls closing in around him as Sae’s grin widened. Did she really look into that just to use it against him? “I did.”

Sae shook her head. “You have an interesting relationship with my sister, don’t you?”

He felt something snap deep in his subconscious. He tried to keep his irritation out of his tone. “She came to me and told me about what he did to her.”

She brought a hand to her chin. “Odd. She never spoke to *me* about it, since I’m her *family* .” Her grin became too antagonizing for him. “Why should we believe anything you say when you’re just pissed off that no one took your little friend’s case seriously enough?”

Because he attacked my daughter!

He knew it was the answer Sae was trying to fish for, but he refused to give it to her. One, she would either make a scene or remind him that there was no *proof* , thus making him more into a liar. Two, Sae only wanted to hear it so she could use it against him, not because she *wanted* to hear it. It still hurt, being so close to breaking down the wall, only for him to run right into it and fall to the ground.

“May I cut in for a moment?”

Everyone turned to face the youngest member in the group who had thus far been silent. “You all are treating Sanada-san like he’s a criminal. Have any of you actually looked into the damage that Kamoshida brought to that school?” Akechi shook his head sadly. “Please excuse me for saying this, but you all should be ashamed of yourselves.” Akechi then bowed to him. “I’ve heard wonderful

reports about your work in Kabukicho, Sanada-san."

He didn't know how to take Akechi's compliment, especially since he was still reeling from Sae's figurative slap to the face. His bosses, however, were quick to attack Akechi. "What would you know about the case, boy? Aren't you still in high school?"

A smirk came to the teen's face. "I am, which is how I was able to find out that Kamoshida was, in fact, abusing his team."

To his complete surprise, Akechi produced a file from his bag and handed it to him. "You'll find that fellow teenagers are more willing to speak to other kids their age. Had I known Kamoshida would have walked in and confessed, I wouldn't have made a brief stop to Shujin the other day to talk to some of the students. I was going to destroy these until I heard about your involvement, Sanada-san. I figured this could help, even if it may be a little too late."

Akihiko stared at the folder hanging in the air between the two of them. The rest of the people in the room did the same. He blinked and reached out to take the file, earning a smile and a slight bow from Akechi. "I do hope this helps calm the tempest that is trying to take you out."

He saw Sae give the boy a look, but Akihiko turned to the men standing next to him. "I would assume you would like to have this so I don't twist these stories and *lie* in my own report."

The file was quickly snatched from his hands by one of his superiors. "We will conduct our own investigation into the matter." Then, a terrifying laugh escaped the man's lips. "Until then, I hope you enjoy your *new life* ."

His heart plummeted into his stomach. "New life?"

Both of his bosses smiled at each other. "You're being transferred."

Akihiko almost attacked both of them. "You can't be serious."

"You can take what you're given, or you can find another job."

He drew in a breath to focus on something before he sent his fists

through their faces. “And where am I being transferred to?”

“Shibuya.” Another round of chuckling. “And the only opening they have there is for patrol.”

So it was back to the basics. It was beyond insulting, but he couldn’t let them know that. “Sounds like fun.” He felt some amount of pride when both of the superiors glared at him before they escorted the politician (his damn name was *Ooe!)* out of the room.

The silence was cut short by another sigh from the director. “We have our hands tied enough with the mental shutdown cases that we don’t need any cops going off the rails.” The old man approached him with a frown. “You’re surprisingly one of my favorites, which is why I agreed with Sae-san about keeping you out of jail.” He heard Sae snort behind him. “But you’re in over your head, boy. Stop sticking your nose into business that has nothing to do with you.”

“With all due respect, sir,” he said to stop the director. “I’ve worked far too long catching criminals who exploit the weaknesses of the youth. While Kamoshida may not have been in my district, he was just as vile as anyone I would have arrested. If you let him go now, you’re only going to hurt those kids.”

He sighed again. “Until this investigation is concluded, Kamoshida will remain locked up. He doesn’t seem to mind. But I would steer clear of any more trouble, understand?”

Akihiko nodded once and the older man walked off. Sae came into his sight and glared at him before she turned and followed after her boss. He almost called out to her, but he realized that he wasn’t alone.

He sighed before addressing the boy standing behind him. “Can’t ever say I’ve had a teenager stick up for me before.” He glanced over his shoulder at Akechi, who only shrugged off his compliment.

“I just focus on the truth and try not to get myself involved with the politics of it all.” Akihiko almost told him that he didn’t care for the drama either, but look where he wound up. “However, I did ask to come along to ask you about a different matter altogether.”

He sighed, the gravity of the situation condensing into something solid and dropping into his stomach. “And what’s that?”

One of Akechi’s gloved hands rested on his chin. Akihiko didn’t know what to make of the smirk coming to his face.

“I would like to know your thoughts about these ‘Phantom Thieves’.”

Akihiko’s first reaction to his question had been to stare back blankly at him. “What?”

Akechi leaned onto his desk, something Akihiko almost called him out on, but the teen spoke first. “I’m assuming you’ve heard of them, yes? Their calling cards, their methods. It’s all fascinating.” A gloved hand rested on his chin. “Kamoshida left one of those cards here. You must have taken a look at it, correct?”

One of his own hands rubbed at the back of his neck to ease some of the tension building in his shoulders. Akihiko never liked Akechi, but if the kid had been willing to step up and take his side on the issue of Kamoshida, he couldn’t ignore his questions. What was the harm? What the hell would Akechi do behind his back if he gave up information about a recently opened investigation?

Hell, Akihiko worried he was going to need all the help he could get to shake off the looming threat over his head made by his superiors. He could only imagine what Ooe would say to the press, *when* he spoke to them. Sae was likely destroying him behind his back at the moment. The director was on the fence, for now. Akechi was the only person he felt like wasn’t trying to throw him under the bus.

So, Akihiko walked behind his desk and pulled out the chair. How much longer did he have before his bosses kicked him out anyway? “I don’t know much. Just that the card Kamoshida brought in was childish. I doubt it was the reason behind why he turned himself in.”

Akechi’s eyebrows furrowed together. “Why do you say that?”

“Because in my twenty plus years working cases in Tokyo, I’ve seen a number of bizarre things. But they all had evidence that was *rational* , not whatever the hell that was.”

“A good cop doesn’t deny any circumstances, but eliminates them with facts.”

Akihiko leaned back in his seat and scowled at the teen. “Are you saying I’m a *bad* cop because I don’t believe in *magic?”*

Akechi pulled a chair from against the wall and promptly lowered himself into it. “You misunderstand, Sanada-san. I’m only asking your thoughts on what has happened. You cannot deny the possibility that this ‘magic’ was, in fact, a likely cause of Kamoshida’s change.”

“You can’t be serious,” he replied with a scoff.

Akechi’s lips curved into a grin. “Pretend that I am.”

“Fine.” He straightened his back, noticing that Akechi followed his actions. He had to take another second or two to gather his thoughts. “I don’t get it. Kamoshida was a completely different person when he came into the police station to turn himself in. Almost like his soul had been sucked out of his body. I’ve dealt with teenagers who have been threatened, and in some ways, there are some similarities.”

Akihiko shook his head, then added, “But this is different. Kamoshida was a vengeful human being and thought nothing could stand in his way. And if they did, he was smart about it. He knew that the students wouldn’t report him if he used violence to stop them. He knew that I was the only cop taking those unreported claims seriously, so he managed to get far enough under my skin that I snapped. *Nothing* could stop him, but then a mysterious card lands in my hands and then he changes?”

He lifted his hand to his temple to brace himself for the incoming headache. “I thought he had been threatened, but a man like Kamoshida would have found a way to get around it. So I thought he had been drugged, but nothing showed up in his bloodwork.” His head started to pound against his fingers. “So truth be told, I have no idea how it all came to be, but I also don’t care.”

Akechi’s head bobbed a few times, then his brown eyes narrowed

slightly. “Sae-san mentioned you knew her sister?”

Akihiko needed a moment to recover from his question. But he knew better than to try and lie to Akechi, knowing he could have mentioned anything he would say to Sae and he could easily lose his one ally. “Yes, I know Makoto. She’s the student council president, so her help was appreciated when I was trying to find evidence to help Sakamoto when he broke his leg.”

His answer seemed to spark something in Akechi, but Akihiko didn’t question what that was. “Do you believe she would know who the Phantom Thieves are?”

Did Akechi plan on speaking to Makoto about the case? He didn’t feel comfortable with Akechi speaking to her *at all* , let alone about something Makoto likely knew nothing about. “Why would you think that?”

“Would you agree that you believe that Shujin students are these mysterious Phantom Thieves?”

Was he trying to suggest that *Makoto* was one of them? “I can’t say for sure, but it would be unrealistic to think that a group of teenagers were able to do what they did *when* they did it. Why would they wait so long to make a move when Kamoshida has been abusing students for…”

He trailed off, his mind already formulating the answer to his own question. Akechi leaned forward, interested to know what answer he was tossing around. “Sanada-san?”

Did Amamiya really have the ability to bring about Kamoshida’s change of heart? Amamiya had just transferred to Shujin, and not even a month later, Kamoshida is in custody for crimes he had committed for over a year?

He didn’t want to believe the boy could do such a thing *legally* , but Akihiko knew no one had simply *told* Kamoshida he was a bad guy and that led to his confession. From what Fuuka had told him, Amamiya wasn’t a known criminal, he didn’t have any history with gangs, so how did *one* teenager do something so drastic? Even with

Ryuji's help, or his cat's help, Kamoshida's change was nothing they could have accomplished without *criminal means.*

"It's nothing," he finally said with a wave of a hand. "I wish I could say I'll look into it more, but in my current condition, I doubt that will make the bosses happy."

Akechi placed both of his hands on his knees with a heavy sigh. "I guess that would be wise." Then the boy pushed himself to his feet. "But you can trust me to investigate. I will keep my ears open for information. Anything I learn, I can pass along to you."

Akihiko wanted to tell him it was fine, that he didn't need to dig into this one-time bizarre incident, but the look in Akechi's eyes was one of determination. He couldn't very well refuse him. "Fair enough. Don't push yourself, Akechi-kun. I'd rather you focus on your studies and leave the casework to the adults."

"Funny," Akechi said with a small laugh. "Sae-san says the exact same thing to me." It took more effort than he thought to keep the shock from rising to his face. "For her sake, I hope you don't push yourself too hard as well, Sanada-san."

For her sake?

Akihiko had to clamp his mouth shut to keep himself from prying Akechi for more details. He was grateful that the teen bowed and left the next minute, leaving him sitting in his office with the weight of the conversations dropping on his shoulders.

Did Sae truly hate him like she always claimed?

Was he going to make it on patrol in Shibuya before he lost his mind?

Would his superiors twist and turn every possible thing they could so they could get rid of him?

But no matter how hard he tried to drown out the nagging voice in the back of his head, it always spoke the loudest.

None of this would be happening if you were strong enough to stop

it.

Chapter 27

Chapter 27

No matter how many over the counter pills she would pop in her mouth to rid herself of the migraines, they kept coming back.

Sae fell into her seat as she exhaled. She knew going to confront Akihiko about the Kamoshida issue would have blown up in her face, but she went anyway. Half of that day had gone down the drain, and the other half had gone by stewing behind paperwork because he was so *smug* about the damn thing. The *only* time she caught any hint of fear from the man had been when she mentioned Makoto.

And yet, he still chose to hide behind the decision that tore his family apart like a damn coward.

Sae told herself that she had enough on her plate to think about, but somehow, Akihiko always found a way to pop up into her life. She had long since accepted that they were both upholders of the law and she would have to work with him from time to time, but she had thankfully been able to avoid him most occasions. Usually, the police had to be the ones to approach *her* , and thanks to his fear of facing her, he always went through some other prosecutor. She was his last resort.

The first time she had to go to *him* had been when she learned he had been stabbed over a year ago. As much as she tried to deny it, she walked out of her office as soon as the news had reached her ears and went straight to the director because she was *worried* . She didn't have to fight too hard for his case, but the director had been very pleased to see her eagerness to take it. As she walked out of the building to the hospital, she grew angry. Why did she care about a man who never wanted her to be a part of his life? Why did she care if he was hurt and/or *dying* ? But even as angry as she was at herself for caring, the one thought that ran through her head had been her mother's words:

“All this anger, this hatred…One day, you’re going to regret it.”

For the first few seconds Sae sat by his bed, she panicked. If he died because of his wound, she couldn’t keep hating him. What would happen to her mother and Makoto? What would happen to *her?* The constant beep of the heart monitor was her only source of comfort as the seconds turned into minutes and into hours. She had to keep reminding herself that he wasn’t *dying* and he would recover and he would be fine and she could go back to being furious with him.

She thanked a god for the first time in her life when he had slowly opened his eyes, even if it was so she could keep hating him instead of drowning in her regret. But as she walked down the hall after talking to him about the incident, all she could hear was that tiny, nagging voice in her head saying, “Kaneshiro would have come after *you* had you shared his name.”

It was one of the few times she left work *on time* to go home. She couldn’t get anything done. She couldn’t *think* . All she kept seeing in her mind was that stupid smile on his face when he realized she was in the room with him. All she could hear was that heartbreaking tone in his voice when he told her he had missed her.

Despite her lack of sleep that night, she went back into work the next day and successfully put Akihiko out of her mind.

The second time had been after their disastrous Christmas Eve when she overheard he had been arrested.

The office had been in a buzz over it. The only detail she really heard was that *Sanada* had tried to *murder* someone in the station. As much as she hated him, she told herself that he would *never* fall to that level of violence unless he had to. She didn’t waste any time and walked into the director’s office and they both worked out a deal. She doubted that Akihiko’s superiors would have been too thrilled about giving him a suspension, but until she learned first-hand what really happened, her boss said he would take care of them.

That same feeling from the hospital hit her square in the chest when

she saw him behind the bars. He had been fighting his restraints. He had been crying. She honestly didn't *recognize* him at first glance, and that wasn't because she hadn't seen him in months. It wasn't until she spoke to him that some of her earlier apprehension faded away and the severity of the situation came into the light again.

He clearly hadn't been expecting a slap on the wrist, but something pulled at her again when he mentioned Makoto. *"That man wants to do more than hurt your sister."* Sae didn't even know *who* he had attacked, but the way he held her gaze said all she needed to know about his victim.

He was a monster. She was willing to place a bet that had this unknown man spoken to her the same way he had spoken to Akihiko, she would be in the same position he was in at the moment.

However, it brought back all of the jealousy and rage when she realized that his concern had only been centered around Makoto. He would *never* go to these lengths had *her* name been brought up by a criminal. How many angry bad guys did she lock up that screamed and cursed her for doing her job? And how many times did *he* come and check in on her?

None. Not one single time.

Not that she *wanted* him to pop in and out of her office just to make sure she was fine, but she doubted Makoto wanted him around the school popping in and out of *her* life, but he did it anyway. It infuriated her. But, she was coming to learn that it was good motivation for work.

So when the first "mental shutdown" case landed on her desk, she told herself she would see it through. She would win her case. She would put the public's concerns to rest. She would rub it in his face because she did everything *on her own* and she *was a Niijima* and *Niijima's don't hide!*

That voice always protested: *Where would you be now if you were a Sanada?*

Probably not fighting constant headaches and babysitting a teenage

detective show-off while hating the man she shared half of her blood with.

“You shouldn’t push yourself like this, Sae-san.”

She *really* disliked Akechi ninety-nine percent of the time. “I don’t recall asking for you to stop by today.”

She looked up at him as he shook his head. “You had been so angry a few days ago that I thought I would stop by to check in on you.”

Sae lifted a hand to her forehead to help nurse the oncoming headache. “And as you can see, I’m fine.”

Akechi chuckled behind his hand. “Well, perhaps I have some information that might make you feel better.” Sae remained as she was, but she didn’t stop Akechi from speaking again. “The police are looking into Kamoshida’s alleged abuse, thanks to my reports.”

“Is this all you wanted to tell me?” She had waited for Makoto after school the day she had met with Akihiko and asked her what had happened between her and Kamoshida. Her sister had hesitated at first, but then she told her most of the details. She could better understand Akihiko’s anger, even if she didn’t *want* to, and hearing the teacher’s name was like nails on a chalkboard now.

And Akechi wanted the credit for taking the man down? Please. Akihiko had the man in his radar for over a year. If anyone deserved any amount of credit, it was him.

The moment the thought crossed her mind, she mentally slapped herself. She was supposed to *hate* him, not stick up for him!

“The Phantom Thieves.”

Hearing this, Sae lifted her head and stared back at the teen with a confused look. “Excuse me?”

Akechi was momentarily startled, but then he was quick to reply. “The Phantom Thieves supposedly left some sort of ‘calling card’ on the bulletin board at Shujin. Sanada-san was kind enough to show me the card Kamoshida had brought into the station the day he

accused him of placing the cards in the school."

Even after her talk with Makoto, Sae still couldn't grasp why Kamoshida had it out for Akihiko as much as he did. She figured there was another confrontation of some kind she was unaware of. That or Kamoshida really was a vengeful man who had it out for every single person who crossed him *once.* She was suddenly grateful for whatever made him confess to the police.

"Don't you find all of this strange?"

Sae blinked and her thoughts came to a stop. She came to face Akechi, who looked at her curiously. "Oh. Why do you think that?"

"The mental shutdown cases are oddly similar."

That caught her attention. "What?"

Akechi stepped closer to her desk. "The two train conductors had a similar expression of guilt as Kamoshida had, at least, from what I gathered from his interrogation with Sanada-san. There's no explanation for the change in personality. It's almost as if someone went into their minds and left with their soul, if that makes sense."

Sae threw herself further back in her seat and crossed her arms. "Are you even listening to yourself?"

"How else would you explain the drastic change in their personality? Kamoshida thrived on the power he had over those students. So why else would he show up and confess to the police?" Akechi sighed, then added, "I know these cases are bizarre, but you can't deny that they have their similarities."

Sae's hand once again tried to relieve the tension she could feel behind her eyes. "And you think these 'Phantom Thieves' were responsible for not only Kamoshida, but the subway accidents?"

Akechi stood in silence, thinking about his answer. "I don't have an answer for that. However, that doesn't give them the right to take matters into their own hands." A slight hint of anger flashed in his eyes. "They must be apprehended."

“I spoke to Makoto.” Sae held up a hand to cut him off. “This man was a criminal who thought he could get away with everything. He attacked *my sister* , but nothing was done. So you tell me, Akechi-kun,” she added with more aggression in her tone. “Tell me who the *real* criminal is here; a group of vigilantes who did the only thing they could to protect the students at Shujin, or a man who broke a boy’s leg, beat his team members, and almost *raped* my sister!?”

Akechi held out his hands as if to calm her down. “I understand that you’re upset, but this is an instance where the law failed. We failed. A man like Kamoshida should have been arrested a long time ago.”

“How do you think it looks when the cops try to make an arrest and fail?” Sae purposely left out *the name* of the cop that had tried, for her own sake, not for Akechi’s knowledge, because he already knew. “Students won’t come forward if they know the justice system won’t bring them any *justice!”*

When Akechi chuckled at her, she was tempted to cross the room and slap him across the face. “This is personal for you, Sae-san. But you must remember who you are.”

The room went cold for several minutes while his words echoed in her ears. *Remember who you are.* She was a Niijima. She had a younger sister. Her parents had *died* years ago. She wanted to work for the prosecution to weed out the criminals her weak father had been afraid would go after his “non-existent” children his entire life. She wasn’t a failure like he was. She wasn’t afraid like he was.

So she offered a small nod to Akechi. “You’re right.”

The young man simply smiled back. “While I would like to excuse these ‘Phantom Thieves’ for their actions against Kamoshida, if we allowed them to escape justice, then we must prepare for a vengeful bloodbath. Others will easily claim to be this mysterious group of people if it means they can get away with whatever they want.”

It was difficult for her to admit that Akechi had a point, so she kept it to herself. “We will keep an eye on them for now, but if this is their only crime, I would like to think I can live with myself if I look the other way.”

Akechi seemed to agree. “I guess until their names are heard again, we will just focus on the mental shutdown cases.”

“Yes,” she said, leaning back into her chair. “And if the Phantom Thieves had anything to do with it, then we will go from there.”

Akechi placed his briefcase down on a nearby chair and popped it open. “I actually did some research this afternoon.” He handed her a manila folder with a smile. “These cases involve something happening to the mind. It’s psychological. I had hoped to speak to a few people who specialize in the field, but that was when I found this.”

Sae flipped open the folder while the teen pulled up a chair. “Wakaba Isshiki?”

“She studied something called cognitive psience.” One of his legs crossed over the other. “I’ve never heard of that term before, so naturally I kept looking into it.”

“Did you contact her?”

His face turned sour. “I couldn’t.”

Sae held his gaze. “Why not?”

“She’s dead.”

Whether or not it was a good lead she still didn’t know, but that gut feeling told her that she had missed her chance. “So why are you giving me her file?”

“Because even though we can’t speak to her, she was close to a few people who she may have trusted this information with.”

Akechi passed her another, much smaller folder. Sae didn’t reach out for it quite yet. “And how would you know all of this?”

He chuckled lightly. “I know people, Sae-san.” The teen shook his head, then wiped his hair out of his eyes. “I heard wonderful things about her. Tragic, what happened to her. But if she passed her knowledge and findings to a relative or a close friend, we need to

speak to them to better understand what's happening."

Sae finally gave in and lifted her hand to grab the folder. *Sojiro Sakura.* "And this man is one of those 'close friends' you are referring to?"

Akechi nodded once. "Correct. As you can tell from his file, he had known Isshiki rather well. My informant tells me that she had *someone* whom she trusted. I can't think of a better man for the job."

"Let me get this straight," she said, crossing her arms and glaring at the teen in front of her. "You want me to investigate a man who may or may not have any information about the mental shutdown cases? Why are we not looking into her research notes or pulling data from her results?"

Akechi's eyes fell from hers and his hands clasped together between his legs. "I've tried looking. She destroyed all of her findings right before she committed suicide. There's nothing left of her research. This is the only way we can make the correlation between the mental shutdowns and the Phantom Thieves."

She was in desperate need for more medication at this point. "Why are you asking me to go on a wild goose chase? I will *not* allow you to make a fool of me."

"Oh," Akechi said in surprise. "That wasn't my intention, Sae-san. I know I don't have a lot to go on, but I guess if you're not interested in what may or may not be a promising lead, I can ask Sanada-san to look into this for me."

Sae froze in her chair. She had half a mind to be thankful that Akechi was too busy wallowing in his disappointment to notice her reaction. When he stood up, Sae slammed her palms onto her desk, more to help snap herself out of her thoughts than to grab his attention.

"You will do no such thing."

Before Akechi could swipe the file away, she did. She hardened her eyes on him, but Akechi smiled brightly at her. It annoyed her. "He

means a lot to you, Sae-san. I'm sure he would-,"

"Enough." Akechi lost his cheeriness the next second. "Anything in relation to this case, you bring to me and *me* only. Do you understand?"

Akechi offered a much more relaxed smile with a nod of his head. "I will do that, Sae-san."

"Now get out."

So now she had to unwind not only from the possible lead she had been given, but from the mention of Akihiko as well. Akechi knew that she dove head-first into his stabbing incident, his arrest, and when she demanded to speak to him about Kamoshida. But she was doing *her job.* Akechi had another thing coming if he thought she *cared* about Akihiko.

However, as she perused the file in her hands, her anger and frustration began to fade away into the back of her mind. Sojiro Sakura was the perfect candidate for her to speak with. Not only did he hold a government job in which he personally had contact with the woman who held all the keys to her case, he left his position shortly after she had died to start a coffee shop. *That* was a red flag, but it wasn't the only one. Sakura also adopted Isshiki's daughter after her passing. That gut feeling told her that Akechi was on to something, and now she knew it to be a fact.

It was all too perfect.

And her days could use a bit more caffeine.

Chapter 28

Chapter 28

Just when things were starting to feel like they were going to *stay* alright, another problem reared its ugly head and tested her family.

It first started with Makoto. Minako worried that something had happened as she noticed her daughter sneaking off to her room at an earlier hour every day. She was coming home a few minutes later from school as well. Nothing terribly unusual, but worth noting. She had to remind herself that she was her father's daughter. She couldn't even begin to count how many times Akihiko had snuck out of the dorm at night to do god knows what without a word to anyone, even if she had been in the lobby before he walked out. So, she let her secrecy slide.

The part that worried her the most was that Makoto wasn't *talking* to her. When she would ask how her day had been, she either got a nod of the head or a quiet, "Good." She never went on to elaborate. Minako shrugged it off for a few days, but then it started to bother her.

Why was Makoto ignoring her? Had she done something to upset her? Did someone at school hurt her again? Did this boy she had a crush on have a girlfriend? Or did that boy do something to that teacher that she had had all the problems with and it scared her? She didn't want to pressure her daughter into talking to her if she was upset. However, before she finally got to the point where she *needed* to talk to her, something else happened.

Akihiko scared the hell out of her when he came home from work way too early and stormed off to their room without a word. He was back out the door before she could even ask him what had gotten into him. She waited for her heart to come to a steady pace, then searched for her phone.

She called him a total of three times, but he never picked up.

So again, the same questions she had been asking about Makoto rushed through her head. Why was he acting like this? Was it because of her? Did Sae say something to him? Had something happened at work?

She was left guessing for several hours, trying to occupy her time by doing some cleaning and reading. Her mind kept wandering until finally, Akihiko came back home. She could tell he had been out running or working out, but he never made eye contact with her.

She put her book down on the table in front of her and stood up. “I’m expecting an apology.”

He continued to stand in his place and catch his breath. When he appeared to have done so, he spoke to her with a quiet voice. “I’m sorry.”

Minako crossed her arms. “Why are you so angry?”

He furrowed his brow and closed his eyes. “It’s nothing for you to worry about.”

“Aki.” He knew better than to minimize his worry like he tended to do when something was bothering him. “Why are you so angry?”

He didn’t answer her right away as he walked over to the dining room table and pulled out one of the chairs. He promptly dropped into it and heaved out a sigh, one of his hands supporting the weight of his head. She suddenly noticed how *tired* he was. “I’m under investigation.”

Minako followed after him and took a seat next to him. “Why?”

“Because I’m a horrible human being and I assaulted a man who is a god and we can’t have *that* kind of behavior in our city.” His tone grew darker with every word he spoke, but he never shouted. His hand quickly went into his hair and he exhaled another sigh. “So until I’ve been cleared or thrown out to the wolves, I’ve been demoted and transferred.”

Demoted?

While her first thought was concern over her husband's state of mind, it slowly turned into a panic. He was the only source of income for the family. When it was just the two of them way back during their early years together, his paycheck hadn't been enough to support both of them, so she had to work. She loved it and didn't mind it, but when Sae was born, it was much harder. With Akihiko's rotating schedule, it was hard to plan her work week so she could be home with their daughter when he was at work. Plus, he had to be on call most days, so she didn't want to leave her infant child alone because he had to go into work while she was at her job.

But somehow, Akihiko managed to make things work, which had been another early life challenge she didn't think she would see through. He told her to stay home with Sae and he would work overtime as much as he could. It was fine for a few days, a few weeks, but *months* would go by without him coming home for more than a day.

Several years went by before she had enough of it. She told him to either find a better job or she would be forced to do something drastic. She had immediately regretted saying it when he told her he was *trying* to find something better, *trying* to work his way up in the system, because he *hated* not being a part of his daughter's life. He had been so *angry* when he yelled at her, but one of the qualities she loved about him had been his patience. He had promised to look harder, so long as she was willing to move if need be.

That was how he found the opening in Tokyo a few years later. It had been a hard few years, but Minako knew that Akihiko was the one who was suffering the most.

But, was all of that going to happen again? Granted Makoto was almost out of the house, they still had to take care of her. The college fund they had set aside for her, would they lose that if Akihiko lost his job? Would he be able to find another one?

"Everything's going to be fine, Minako."

His voice pulled her out of her thoughts, but she feared more damage had been done by her worrying. She felt slightly guilty for it. "Where are you being transferred to?"

Were they going to have to relocate just so they could stay together for however long he was under investigation? Would Makoto have to switch schools? Would Makoto *want* to transfer?

He must have sensed her hidden questions. He offered a small, but warm smile and reached for her hand on the table. “I’m just going to be roaming around Shibuya for a few days, or a few weeks.” He squeezed her hand. “This was meant to be insulting, but now I get to go help people in another area of the city. I think it’ll be alright.”

She admired his positivity when she least expected it. But, “And what if you go to jail?”

He pulled back for a second. “What?”

Minako placed both of her hands under the table and held them together on her lap. “What’s going to happen if you go to jail?”

“Minako.” His tone cut through her anxiety and she looked down at the table. “I’m not going to go to jail. Worse comes to worse, I’ll lose my job. But I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“They wouldn’t be investigating you if you did nothing wrong!” There was a flash of fear in his eyes and she was immediately filled with regret. “I…I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for you to think I’m blaming you.” She drew in a breath. “I just…I don’t want to lose you.”

A sad smile stretched over his face as he grabbed her hands still clasped underneath the table. “That schoolteacher who hurt Makoto turned himself in.” Minako gasped at that. “But since he came to speak to me, the brass thinks that I coerced a confession out of him. The other detective in the room submitted the formal report, but I guess I should have read his report rather than try and question him myself.”

“W-Why is that a bad thing?” She never understood the politics of police work. She thought herself childish from time to time, always preaching that right and wrong were as simple as night and day. She knew it was more complex, according to the law, but stories like this always confused her. Why did it matter who talked to who when it was the *words* they should be focusing on?

Akihiko chuckled at her. “Well, I did beat the hell out of him, so it doesn’t look all that great.”

Minako couldn’t help the small smile that came to her face. “But you didn’t force him to talk to you.”

“Which is why nothing is going to happen.” He pushed his chair back, but she remained seated. “It might be hard for a few days, but I promise you, Minako, everything is going to be fine.”

His words washed her concerns away. She slowly came to her feet as well and stood in front of him. Sometimes she forgot that she didn’t need to be the strong one in the relationship. He could support her just as easily, if not better, than she supported him. She stretched out her arms and wrapped them around his back while he placed his over her shoulders. He leaned his head into hers and for several minutes, they just stood there in each other’s arms.

It was nice, until he jerked slightly at the sound of the door opening. Not that Minako *wanted* to start anything with him, but their moments were getting harder and harder to come by. She had to take them when she could.

“You’re home late.”

Makoto glanced at Akihiko, then to her, before she nodded her head, apologized, then walked off to her room. Akihiko watched her walk away, then turned to her. “What’s that all about?”

Minako shrugged her shoulders. “I honestly have no idea.”

He gave her a look, but she made her way into the kitchen as a means to ignore the question on his tongue. Since she had been wrapped up in a conversation with Akihiko, she didn’t have time to make dinner, but a part of her debated about starting it at all. She didn’t think she had the energy to stop those earlier doubts from creeping back into her mind.

“Is…Is everything okay?”

She decided it was best to feed her family before Akihiko took it upon himself to make dinner. She found herself smiling at the humor

of it and was even half tempted to let him take control of the one thing she felt she could do *right* in the house.

It was harder to ignore him when he came to stand beside her. “Minako?”

She turned towards the fridge to look to see what she could work with. “I don’t know.” She found some beef that she could use to make some beef bowl, even if her version would never be good enough for Akihiko. (He had told her that years ago, then realized what he had said, apologized, but the damage had already been done.)

She did, however, catch a small glint in his eyes when she pulled the beef out of the fridge. “Beef bowl?”

A small chuckle escaped her lips. “I haven’t even started yet and that’s the one thing you think about?”

Her heart warmed a degree when he smiled at her. “You haven’t made it in years.”

“You told me it wasn’t good the last time I made it,” she replied, her smile growing bigger when he frowned with a slight flush to his cheeks.

“I told you I was sorry.”

She gave him a quick kiss to let him know she had long forgiven him, then pushed him out of her way. “I don’t know if I feel comfortable cooking with you in the kitchen. You’ll pour all that protein powder on the rice when I’m not looking.”

She was hoping he would say something to defend himself, or laugh and give her the space she wanted, but instead, he grabbed her by the wrist. “What’s wrong?”

The tone in his voice was hushed, maybe even a little hurt, but either way, it took the breath out of her lungs. He pulled on her arm enough that she bumped into his chest, but she didn’t pull away from him. She clung to his shirt, trying not to admit that she felt like a horrible mother and that Makoto was growing up and she didn’t

need her all the time anymore…

“Makoto’s growing up too fast.” It wasn’t the root of the problem, but since she said it out loud, she made peace with it. Akihiko’s arms snaked around her back as he listened to her. “Sometimes, it’s hard for me to accept.”

“She’ll always be our little girl, Minako.”

She would not cry over this. She wouldn’t. She refused to. “But she’s not speaking to me anymore.” She felt a few tears fall from her eyes. She squeezed them shut to keep any more from falling. “She doesn’t want to talk to me. She won’t tell me how her day is, how school is going, if anyone is hurting her, anything. I don’t know what I can even do anymore.”

His arms tightened around her, but he sadly didn’t say a word. Maybe he knew how it felt because Sae wouldn’t speak to him but would go out of her way to speak to her. But she didn’t understand why Makoto had just stopped talking to her at all. Did she need to be more forceful? Did she need to break down her door and *punish* her if she wouldn’t answer her questions to her liking? Was that something a good parent would do to their children?

“I’ll talk to her.”

Minako shook her head and pulled away from him, much to his surprise. “No.” She wiped a hand over her eyes. “I don’t want her to have to talk to me if she doesn’t want to.”

Akihiko looked ready to say something, but after a few seconds, he closed his mouth and looked away from her. “Alright.”

She knew her beef bowl wasn’t wonderful, even if she could have sworn she used all the same ingredients in the sauce as she had found a few months ago off a restaurant’s website. She wasn’t an expert, but she was also pretty sure Akihiko only finished his meal because he felt obligated to.

She also blamed the atmosphere for her inability to *taste* anything. Makoto sat across from her, her eyes never leaving her meal. As

soon as she was done, she stood and thanked her for dinner, then made her way back to her room.

“Makoto.”

Akihiko’s voice made her jump in her seat, but Makoto appeared back in front of her with a shy look on her face. “Yes?”

“How was school?”

Makoto appeared confused by her father’s question, but then she gave him a light shrug of her shoulders. “Um, it was good?”

Before Akihiko could ask her another question, Minako silenced him. “You’re free to go, Makoto.”

Her daughter seemed to be struck by her words, but she bit her bottom lip, nodded, and returned to her room. Minako stood, effectively cutting Akihiko off, and reached across the table to grab Makoto’s empty bowl.

Akihiko followed her into the kitchen. “Maybe it’s just a phase.”

She almost dropped the bowl in her hands. It might have been. Akihiko had gone through his own phase in high school when he did everything he could to avoid her at every turn. And how did she handle that back then?

Tough love. A taste of his own medicine.

She just hoped it would work with her daughter.

Chapter 29

Chapter 29

“I need you to find these Phantom Thieves before they hurt someone else!”

Despite the fact she said “no” several times (in a kind way), the principal did not give her any means to decline. “This is an outrage! We must find those responsible and deal with them quickly!”

It took great effort not to roll her eyes while she stood in front of him. Instead of getting the head start he expected her to take, Makoto spent the rest of her afternoon in the school library. She had to prepare for the upcoming mock entrance exams that she told Sis she would take. That was why she gave her that book for Christmas last year. It was the perfect study guide, even if Makoto had no idea how she had acquired it. Now that she didn’t have to worry about Kamoshida, she could actually sit down and get some serious studying done.

How dare the principal ask her to find whoever “messed up” Kamoshida. She didn’t even understand *how* it had happened. And even if she did, even if she *knew* who was at fault, she wasn’t going to turn them in. Had this mysterious group of people brought about a change for the worst, then maybe she would feel more inclined to help.

Besides, it wasn’t like she was a professional like her dad or her sister. What did the principal honestly expect her to do?

By the time she pushed the questions and anger out of her mind, hours had gone by. She cursed under her breath. Kamoshida was behind bars but he was *still* the source of a majority of her problems. She couldn’t really complain, though. Behind bars was a better alternative to roaming around the halls ready to pounce on her the second her back turned to him.

She decided to call it a day, as frustrating as it had been to do. She

carefully placed the book into her bag and pushed her chair back, the sound echoing in the empty room. A familiar dread filled her heart as she walked towards the door, worried that maybe she had imagined the last few days. Kamoshida was still waiting for her. He was going to kill her or do whatever else he wanted to do to her. The school was practically empty…

What was she thinking staying so late?

Makoto remained tense and her senses were on high alert as she locked up the library. The entire floor seemed too quiet for her, too dark, too haunting. *Someone* was waiting for her. She could *feel* it. She scrambled to reach into her bag for her phone. She knew her dad would come pick her up if she called him. She knew her mother would too.

But…she thought it was silly. She was an *adult* now. Kamoshida was in jail. No one else would stick around after school this long just to harm her. She really needed to stop *thinking* so much. So, she took a deep breath to calm her nerves, then took one step towards the staircase.

As soon as she made it down the first flight of steps, she heard voices. She clapped a hand over her mouth to cover her scream, but then her mind ran away with her again. Her gut instinct had been right all along. Someone was there. Some *people* were there. She heard a boy's voice *and* a girl's voice. Not willing to be caught off guard, she took a battle-ready stance and called out to the voices.

"Who's out there?"

She was met with silence. It did nothing for her nerves. She called out again, adding in that she knew aikido and could defend herself easily enough. When no one responded a second time, she took a few steps towards where she thought they were waiting for her.

"This is your last warning." She hoped they couldn't hear her fright in her tone.

And even though she was prepared for someone to come out of the shadows, she still jumped when a figure showed themselves.

“It’s just me, sorry.”

It wasn’t Kamoshida. It wasn’t some tattooed and beefy looking maniac with a knife between his teeth. It wasn’t a horrifying monster she was worried would eat her brains when she was asleep at night. It was a tall and lanky kid with a mop of black hair and big glasses and a familiar grin and…

“A-Amamiya-kun?”

He rubbed the back of his head as he turned to face down the third-floor hallway he was standing in. “Sorry. I might have…fallen asleep after school let out today.”

Makoto stood in the stairwell looking up at him as she took several deep breaths to calm down. It was strange that he would still be around school, but he *had* been pretty tired quite often. “Are you still adjusting to the city?”

However, it *had* been a month now. He had to have been used to it by now. Her question seemed to catch him off guard, but he was quick to cover it up and threw his hands into his pockets. “A little. I’m a little nervous about my exam scores. I feel like I did well, but I’m sure my class is ready to discredit me.”

She was suddenly filled with shame for prying. “Oh.” Her eyes studied the floor and she wiped her hands over her skirt. She didn’t know what else to say to him, small talk never really being her strong suit in life. But the silence was crushing her. He wasn’t moving, just standing at the top of the staircase with that cocky and cute little grin and…

“I’m sure you did fine,” she choked out, half out of the need to say *something* and the other half to derail her thoughts. She could not *believe* she thought something about him was cute. Her mother would have a field day for months.

Much to her dismay, his grin only widened. “That’s really nice of you to say, Niijima-senpai.”

She could feel the blush burning on her face, so she turned to keep

him from noticing it. “I-I’m about to lock up the school, so you should probably head home.”

From the corner of her eyes, she saw him nod and walk down the stairs until he was standing next to her. She was grateful for the low lightning in the stairwell. “Can I escort you to the station?”

Everything about him, from that damn smile on his face to the way he held himself when he asked her, almost forced her to run down the stairs and never look back. He may have been kind to her thus far, but she still had a few unanswered questions about him. Plus, if Kamoshida was gone, he had no reason to stick around her anymore.

Right?

She attempted to tell him as much through the slight burn in her soul. “Um, you don’t need to worry about me anymore. Kamoshida has been dealt with.”

“True,” he replied with a shrug of his shoulders. “I just thought since we were both heading out that I would at least ask before I made you uncomfortable again.”

He would never let her live that down, not that she could really blame him. But before she could give him an answer, a loud *ping* came from his pocket. He pulled out his phone, read over the supposed message, then pocketed the device again. “I don’t mind waiting for you to lock up.”

She shook her head and grabbed the strap of her bag over her shoulder. “You should go home and get some rest.”

There was a sad look in his eyes, but the second she started to regret rejecting his offer, he bowed to her. “I hope you have a good evening, Niijima-senpai.”

Makoto almost, *almost* called out to him once he turned the corner, but she stopped herself. She shouldn’t feel bad. He shouldn’t even be at school this late anyway.

She didn’t want to go home, but she didn’t want to worry her parents

by being out too late. To her surprise, when she finally stepped into the apartment, her mother was the only one in the living room. She looked up to the clock on the wall before she addressed her mom.

“Um, Dad’s not home?”

“You’re home late again.”

Her statement knocked Makoto back against the door. “Oh.” She knew her mom was likely getting annoyed with her always ignoring her questions and staying later at school or avoiding her all together. Makoto didn’t think it was that big of a deal, but… “I’m sorry.”

Her mom kept her eyes on the book she had in her hands. “Dinner is in the fridge if you’re hungry. Your father’s under investigation. He’s working second shift for the time being.”

She lifted a hand to her mouth. “Dad’s under investigation? Why?”

She watched her mother flip another page. “Ask him yourself.”

It was rare for her mom to be so short with her, but Makoto was too intimidated by it to ask her what was wrong. So she placed her bag down by the couch and walked into the kitchen. She ate her dinner in silence. She went to bed without another word from her mom. She had a hell of a time falling asleep, but she eventually let her mind unwind on its own and she was able to get a solid three hours of sleep before she had to be up and ready for school.

She didn’t see her mom in the morning, or her dad, so she went to school on an empty stomach and a sad heart. A million thoughts raced through her head, but none of them anything she wanted to think about. She worried something had happened between her parents. Why else would her mom sound so bitter about her dad being under investigation? Why was he under investigation? Did he beat up someone else? Is that why her mom was so aggravated? But why was she taking it out on her?

Or, did *she* do something wrong? Makoto had been kind of secretive lately. She just didn’t know how to talk to her mom about the details of Kamoshida’s confession when she really couldn’t understand it

herself. Plus, there was Amamiya being odd about the entire thing and she *really* didn't want to bring him up with her mom again.

Speaking of Amamiya, she spotted him at Shibuya Station the next morning, but to her surprise, he wasn't alone. He was talking to Takamaki about some topic that brought a smile to her face. As hard as it was to ignore the sight of the two of them together, what caught her attention the most was the black cat with a yellow collar that was propped up on Amamiya's shoulders from his school bag. She was quite a distance away, but as she got closer, two things hit her.

One: it was the same cat that had saved her from Kamoshida when he had attacked her. Was this cat Amamiya's cat? But…how would he have been able to tell the animal to follow her around to protect her? If that's what *really* happened. It was silly enough that she discarded the thought.

Two: she remembered hearing two voices yesterday at school. And she could now place the female voice as Takamaki and the male voice as Amamiya. She couldn't hear any words, but she was fairly confident that it was their voices. And if that was true, why did Amamiya lie to her? What had he been *doing* with Takamaki at school when no one was there? Makoto focused on the fact that he had lied to her rather than the fact he was with another girl. Then something else hit her.

Was Amamiya trying to *stall* her in the stairwell? Was that text message from Takamaki telling him she had left the school?

She knew it really wasn't any of her business, but she reminded herself that Amamiya had lied to her. Regardless of what the two of them had been doing after school, there was no need to deny it in front of her. The fact Amamiya carried around a cat that *might* have helped her only made her more curious to know who this boy really was.

She knew very little about him. She didn't know why he had been transferred, if it had anything to do with the rumors, why he felt so obligated to protect her, why he carried around a cat in his bag when it was against the rules. She waited for another train, unable to get on the same one as Amamiya and Takamaki unless one of them

recognized her. But while she waited, she built up her courage.

She would follow him around for a while. It was her *duty* to know if students were getting into trouble. It was her *duty to* make sure the students were following the rules. She considered it *duty* to make sure Amamiya wasn't masquerading as a charming teenage boy when he was, in fact, a criminal.

It was easier said than done.

Makoto had somehow managed to have a clear afternoon, but she felt odd waiting outside of Amamiya's homeroom just to follow him around. But if she didn't and he left the school grounds, she would have no idea where he would be going and all of this would be for nothing. So she compromised and made herself comfortable at Aoyama-Ichome Station. He could easily go to another subway station if he had been willing to walk that distance, but as he was still new to the city, she doubted it. Not yet, anyway.

Hopefully not ever.

She pulled out a book from her bag. It wasn't anything interesting, her first choice from her bag was her history book. But it would help pass the time as she waited. She made a mental note to swing by a bookstore on her way home to find something more entertaining. But for now, she hoped she appeared to others passing by as a dedicated high school student preparing for her history class…in a train station…

To her surprise, she didn't have to wait too long for Amamiya. He was alone this time, which made her feel a little better. She worried about the cat, if the poor creature had to fend for itself while Amamiya was at school or if he really kept it in his bag throughout the school day. She watched him play on his phone, appearing to type out some sort of message maybe, then the train came into the station.

Makoto panicked. If she got on the train close enough to him, would he notice her? Would he ask her what she was doing? Did she need to have a backstory ready in case he asked her? She shook her head and made a mad dash onto the car next to the one he stepped

into before the doors closed.

Seriously, she needed to stop thinking so much sometimes.

She could barely see him through the crowds of people headed home on the afternoon commute. She couldn't stare at him the entire time, but she was thankful that the cramped train could offer her an angle that didn't make it seem forced. He kept messing around on his phone, but she couldn't begin to think about what he could possibly be doing.

Nothing seemed out of the ordinary when he stepped off the train at Shibuya. She was unaware of the train route he had to take to get home, but she knew it wasn't a part of the metro system. She followed behind him at a safe enough distance, her book carefully tucked under her arm in case she needed to pull it out to hide her face. That's how people in the movies followed others around, right?

When she reached the ticketing gates, she moved on reflex, dropping her phone over the scanner and pushing on through with the people leaving. She had to move faster to keep Amamiya in her sights, but she noticed that he wasn't headed to another subway line. He took the Hachiko exit, so she thought that he was headed to the JR lines and preferred to be outside? Maybe it was a quicker route?

But then he started walking towards Central Street and a weak smile came to her lips.

Oh, he was up to something. He wasn't going home. He wasn't anywhere she felt he should be. For someone who always seemed so tired, he sure liked to do everything *but* rest properly.

Makoto was thrown for a loop when he stepped into the convenience store instead of doing something…unusual. She didn't know whether to follow him inside or wait for him, so she chose the latter. It would be hard to explain running into him at the same store without telling him she had followed him from school or running out without buying anything when he caught her.

But the minutes turned into an hour, almost two, and he had not

come back out. The sun was starting to set over the buildings. Her stomach started to grumble. She was tired of feeling eyes on her as she walked in the same circle for over an hour and a half.

She knew she was out of options. She took a deep breath, then pushed herself into the store. Surely there was something in the store she needed to pick up, if not for her, then for her mom or her dad. Besides, what on earth could Amamiya be doing in one store for almost two hours?

She found some chocolate she thought she could give to her mom as an apology if she was mad at her. She probably needed to give her something after today, since she was going to be home late again. And as of right now, she had no reason to be out so late.

Until she cut her losses, assumed she had somehow missed Amamiya leaving the store, and walked up to pay for the sweets.

The box of chocolates landed with a *thump* on the counter when she came face to face with Amamiya. He was surprised to see her as well, but then it faded and that charming grin came to his face. “Coming to see me at work, Niijima-senpai? That’s really thoughtful of you.”

If she could have slapped herself in the face without making her answer obvious, she would have. Not that her startled silence was any better, since he only chuckled at her and rang up her purchase.

“Who are these for? A boyfriend?”

Well, she couldn’t tell him the truth because technically her parents were dead, but that didn’t mean she had to answer his question honestly. Or at all! But she was burning under his stare. “N-No.”

“So you’re single then?”

She didn’t even respond to him as she dropped her money into his hand, grabbed the box, and walked away. The only time she paused on her way back to the station was to stop by the bookstore. It served as an excellent distraction from the ridiculous question Amamiya had thrown in her face.

Did she have a boyfriend? No. Did she want one? No. Was that any of his business? No.

Surely with all the time he was spending with Takamaki after school, *they* were an item…

She shook her head and proceeded with her mission. Charming antics and unnerving questions aside, Amamiya was up to something. She knew it.

She would *prove* it.

Chapter 30

Chapter 30

“She’s following you again.”

Ren sighed heavily as he made *another* turn down an alleyway. He had been walking around Central Street for an hour now trying to lose his recent “stalker.”

“What did you do to make her mad enough that she wanted to follow you around?”

He thought the first time he saw her in the store when he was working was cute. It could easily be explained away. It was on her way home. She was only in the store for a few minutes. In and out. But she had been utterly *terrified* seeing him there. Almost as if she *knew* he was there, but didn’t expect to *actually* see him. He thought little of it, but after a few weeks of Morgana telling him to be careful because Niijima-senpai was a few paces behind him, it started to get annoying.

“I don’t know.”

He really didn’t have any idea why she would resort to stalking him. He didn’t think she thought he was responsible for Kamoshida. Even if she did, she couldn’t *prove* what he had done. He may have only known her for a month now, but she was fairly easy to read. Her facial expressions gave her away before her words would. She may have been confused about the entire event, but he knew she didn’t *know* .

“Maybe you should go to work or something,” Morgana whispered from his bag. “Establish a reason to be here.”

Ren grumbled. “I *have* . She’s followed me to the store a few times already. I even show up every other day so she doesn’t think I’m going off script.”

“Well,” Morgana said quietly. “Maybe she likes you!”

Yeah. *That* was what it was.

He ignored Morgana completely as he walked down the stairs into the underground mall. He doubted he could lose Niijima-senpai, but with several shops and things to look at, he felt more at ease than roaming around a single street he had been roaming around for *days* now. It angered him that he had to do all of this just so he could shake her off his trail.

“I think you lost her.” Morgana rubbed his head against his back in an effort to calm him down. “I don’t see her down here.” The cat jumped back onto his shoulder. “However, I saw a pamphlet for another job at the flower shop! Now you could shake her even more!”

He clenched his fists. “I shouldn’t have to shake her *at all!”*

His feline companion went quiet as he continued to walk through the mall and to his train line. Eventually, his silence made Ren feel bad for his outburst, as calm as it had been. “I’m sorry, Morgana. I just don’t know what I’ve done to deserve to be treated like a criminal. I can be as nice as I possibly can to her, but it’s never enough.”

“Maybe you should sit down and talk to her then.”

Ren laughed darkly at his suggestion. “Yeah. I’m sure that would solve all of my problems.”

However, as he fell onto his bed that night, he thought about maybe meeting with Niijima-senpai and getting all of this off his chest. There was no need for her to follow him around and aggravate him when he never did anything wrong. He could ask her why she felt the need to stalk him, answer her questions that she had (within reason, of course) and put this newfound mess behind them.

Despite Ryuji always telling him he was a badass, he couldn’t find the courage to face Niijima-senpai after school the following day.

However, his usual afternoon commute back into Shibuya took a turn when he crossed the intersection to head to Central Street. Ren

couldn't help the smile that stretched across his face when he ran into a "friend".

"Good afternoon, Sanada-san."

He hadn't expected to see the older man out and about in Shibuya, but it was a turn of events he was *not* willing to pass up. He was with a younger cop, both of them dressed in a typical police uniform, but Sanada nodded the younger cop away before he turned to address him.

"What are you doing here?"

Ren should have anticipated him asking, but he kept his motives hidden for now. "I work at the convenience store right up the street on Tuesdays and Thursdays."

A confused look came to the other man's face. "You work there *and* at the coffee shop?"

Ren was thankful that he was *not* Niijima-senpai and could keep the horror off his face. He was so wrapped up in his own reasons for stopping the man that he completely forgot he had met him at Leblanc. "Sakura-san doesn't pay his dish boys very well."

Regardless of his lie, Sanada cracked a smile at his attempt at humor. "You should ask him to show you how to make coffee then. That skill alone should be worth your trouble."

He took his advice into consideration. "It sadly doesn't sound like that could pay for my entertainment budget."

Probably not what he should have said while walking down a supposed crime street. "Oh?"

Morgana nudged his head against his back, but Ren shook his head. "I like to go to the movies from time to time, or find a good book to read. That kind of stuff isn't free, even if it's relatively cheap." Ren nodded his head towards the store. "Which is why I picked up the job there."

Sanada still eyed him with suspicion for another second or two, but

then he shrugged his shoulders. “Just stay out of trouble, alright?”

He was coming to understand why Ryuji liked this guy. It was hard to *dislike* him, even if he didn’t trust him. However… “I’m actually glad I ran into you.” His statement caught Sanada’s attention and Ren didn’t waste another second. “I think I have a stalker.”

Sanada’s eyes widened for a second, but then he became much more attentive. It shook Ren up, if only slightly. “And why do you think that?”

Ren remembered that Sanada had been very calm when he asked him about Kamoshida the other day in Leblanc. He also remembered that Morgana had seemed to trust him. Deep down, Ren told himself Sanada was a good person. But, his freedom was not something he was willing to put on the line, at least not right now.

“Because I’ve spent this entire week trying to lose them, but they follow me wherever I go. Even if I go to work, or to eat with Ryuji, or to see a goddamn *movie,* they’re always a few steps behind me! ”

He felt Morgana’s head press against his back again, so he reeled in his anger. Sanada seemed surprised by his outburst, but Ren only hoped that helped strengthen the case he was about to drop on his head. “Sorry. It’s just annoying, but I’m sick of it.” Then, “Will you help me?”

Stalking wasn’t technically a crime (he didn’t think), so he worried for a moment that Sanada would tell him off. However, the older man scratched the back of his head, a tired look coming over his face. “Alright. Do you know who it is at least?”

It was the question he had been hoping he would ask. “I do.”

Sanada waited, but Ren had to fight back a smile in case he took it the wrong way and walked off. “…And?”

“It’s Niijima-senpai.”

He got the reaction he expected. Sanada reeled back in shock, his expression changing from tired to horrified in less than a second.

“W- *What?”*

Funny. Ren thought Niijima-senpai’s reaction was exactly the same when he caught her off guard. “Can you help me?”

The man stood before him for the longest time, appearing to come to terms with the fact that this high school friend of his was stalking *him.* “Why would Makoto follow you around?”

He also thought it was odd that he would refer to Ryuji by his last name but not Niijima-senpai. “I don’t know.” Ren shrugged his shoulders. “She does know a cop though. So maybe he sent her to follow me around because I’m a *criminal* .”

Ren watched the man carefully. He was a cop, so he was well educated in reading reactions and probably knew how to hide them as well. Surprisingly, he either failed the facial expression class or he was far too honest about everything. “I didn’t send Makoto to hound you because of your status.”

As much as Ren wanted to rebuke him, there was very little he could say in his defense. Plus, the man’s reactions, words and expression, all seemed genuine. The fact that Sanada held his narrowing gaze made him believe that maybe he really *didn’t* send Niijima-senpai after him and she did it on her own volition. Or maybe Ren himself was too forgiving…

“I’ll talk to her.”

However, he wasn’t so sure he wanted Sanada to *tell* Niijima-senpai that he *knew* she was following him. So, he asked a different question. “Why would you be in contact with her since Kamoshida is in prison?”

The man hesitated for far too long for Ren’s liking, but he had no idea as to why he would want to form an elaborate excuse to hide the truth. Whatever the truth was anyway. It made him that much more desperate to know who this guy really was. Leverage, as Morgana had called it.

“They are investigating the reason *why* Kamoshida confessed. She’s

an excellent source of information since she's the eyes and ears of Shujin."

Deep down, Ren didn't buy his explanation, but he had no evidence to contradict him. However, his statement did clue him in on another matter. "Investigation?"

Sanada rubbed the back of his head. "Well, seeing as how I'm in Shibuya on damn patrol, there's not a lot I can tell you." He sighed when Ren's eyes widened in surprise. "Sorry. It's been a stressful couple of days."

"He would be a useful ally, Ren," he heard Morgana whisper through the bag. "Plus, if this means the police are going to investigate us, we need the heads up on their movements!"

As much as he didn't want to, Ren found himself agreeing. "Stressful few days?"

Sanada appeared taken back by his interest, but to Ren's disappointment, he didn't take the bait. "I'll talk to Makoto when I see her again. Hopefully that will put an end to your worries."

Again, Ren told himself that he didn't want Niijima-senpai to know he was aware of her tailing him, but at the moment, he had to cut his losses. He couldn't stop Sanada now and tell him he was only kidding or that he didn't see her as a threat worthy of his time. So, he bowed politely and thanked him for his help before the older man walked down the street out of sight.

"Well, that was odd." Morgana propped himself on his shoulder once the coast was clear. "He didn't even ask for any details. He must really like you if he's willing to go after someone he's known longer just for bothering you."

It brought up an interesting point. Morgana was correct. *Why?* He simply told Sanada the name of who was following him and that had surprisingly been enough for him. Given that Sanada should have known Niijima-senpai better than Ren, he should have questioned him rather than offer to solve the problem on his behalf.

Maybe Sanada *did* send Niijima-senpai to follow him and was upset that she got caught.

“Morgana,” he said quickly, knowing he was losing time. “I want you to follow him. If he’s sending someone to follow my every movement, I want to know.”

Morgana’s head fell slightly. “I don’t think he’s like that, Ren.”

“Until I know for a fact, I can’t trust him.” He looked over at the cat. “They’ve known each other for longer than I’ve been here, probably for years. He’s known Ryuji for over a year now and he doesn’t refer to him by his first name.”

“True.”

“I want to stay one step ahead of him, and right now, he’s two steps ahead of me. And since he’s a *cop* , I don’t want to put blind faith in him.” He felt Morgana nod and jump out of his bag onto the ground by his feet. “If everything goes well, I can learn something about him to even the playing field, right?”

The cat smiled and wagged his tail. “Okay! But don’t be disappointed if the guy is clean like I think he is!”

Ren shooed him off with a wave of the hand. Morgana was gone the next second. Knowing he was several minutes late if he wanted to pick up a shift at the store, he decided to treat himself to dinner at Big Bang Burger.

He made a mistake trying to take on the “Cosmic Challenge,” but when he went back to Leblanc, he was able to focus on the disgusting amount of food he had tried to finish (and failed) and it helped him fall asleep.

His dreams were peaceful. His mind was at rest. He slept for a solid seven hours.

He couldn’t tell if he felt great because he was doing some good for the city by exposing people like Kamoshida (and now Madarame), or if it was finally getting the upper hand on people trying to undermine him.

Both. He told himself it was because of both those reasons.

It just would have been so much better if he could see Niijima-senpai's reaction when Sanada talked to her.

Chapter 31

Chapter 31

Akihiko didn't want to admit that Amamiya's words had shaken him up.

Makoto was *stalking* him? Why? Why did he have such a hard time believing it? Makoto wouldn't have a reason to follow the boy around, right? And if so, why was he hearing it from Amamiya and not from Makoto?

Was that why she had been avoiding talking to her mother? Granted, it was slightly more difficult for him to talk to Makoto since he had been on second shift for the entire week, but she could have spoken to Minako. By the time he got home, it was late, and Makoto was already in bed. The one time he had been up and about when she was getting ready for school, she didn't seem to act any differently.

That was about to change.

He told Amamiya he would talk to her, so that's what he planned on doing. Maybe it was a misunderstanding. Maybe they were all random coincidences. Maybe Amamiya was yanking his chain, even if he had no idea why he would. All because he had shown up at the coffee shop and tried to get him to talk? Was this some kind of test Amamiya had thought up at school once Akihiko had confronted him about his record?

The more he thought about it, the more annoyed he got. Shibuya was filled with teenagers who found themselves in more trouble than they should, but *stalking?* That was the best Amamiya could do? And why would the teen look so smug telling him that? It didn't make any sense. Unless…

Unless he really did think he sent Makoto after him and thought he had caught him in his own lie.

He really, *really* needed a break from everything. The only thing he felt he could take away from his first week in Shibuya had been when him and his rookie partner helped two terrified high school students who were being harassed by a few older punks. Everything else that week was just a test of his patience.

He was losing heart again. He was tired of failing to make a difference. He was irritated that he couldn't figure out Amamiya's motives, but also irritated that he was spending brain power trying to figure them out. He was irritated that Makoto was acting like this, and also irritated that she wasn't speaking to her mother. He was irritated to be out of his comfort zone, away from his coworkers, and still feeling like someone was always watching his every move.

"Everything alright, Sanada-san?"

Akihiko stopped in his tracks when he heard his name. Toshiro Hitoshi, his young in-training partner, stood in front of him with his head tilted to one side. "You were gone for a while."

A positive aspect about his "punishment" was that he was able to be a sort of leader for a rookie. Hitoshi was fresh out of college, always seemed to be energetic, and had been excited to train under him for a few weeks. With his mind wandering as much as it had been, Akihiko worried he wasn't doing enough for the young man, but either the kid didn't care or he was holding up better than he thought.

"Sorry," he said as he rubbed the back of his head. "Got caught up talking to someone I know."

His trainee nodded at him. "That kid goes to Shujin, yes?"

Well, Akihiko hadn't been expecting that. Recognizing school uniforms was something that took him over a year to do. How would a brand-new cop know them already? "Um, yes. He does."

But Hitoshi didn't comment any further and slowly turned away from him. Something about his demeanor set something off in him, but he let it go. He sure as hell didn't want to add to his growing list of complications.

However, walking around with the young man for a few hours in silence eventually pulled the question out of him. “That boy I spoke to. Did you know him?”

His partner came to a stop next to him. “I don’t know *him* . But…” He trailed off and Akihiko felt an unsettling feeling drop in his stomach. “The uniform I recognize.”

A part of him was disappointed Hitoshi didn’t know Amamiya and now couldn’t use him as a source of information. He would have let the conversation die then and there, but that gut feeling was stirring too fast for his liking. “Oh?”

“My little brother went to Shujin, until recently.”

Akihiko started to grow anxious in the silence. He kept his eyes up and he scanned through the hordes of people beginning to crowd the streets. “Did something happen?”

He heard a muffled laugh from Hitoshi. “He transferred schools last month.”

Odd thing to do at the beginning of the year. However, Akihiko really didn’t want to pry any further into this kid’s life. Hitoshi seemed like he was only answering the questions he would ask rather than elaborate, so he decided to let the uncomfortable silence take back over.

“I would watch your back if I were you.”

Hearing his grumble made Akihiko look over at him in confusion. “What?”

The rookie cop looked away with anger flashing across his face. “My brother was so excited when he started playing volleyball for Kamoshida.” Akihiko’s heart fell into his stomach. “He loved the sport. He even watched that guy play in the Olympics. He wanted to be just like him.”

Hitoshi’s eyes met with his own. “He fought to get better every day, pushing through the pain, the sorrow, *everything* to get better. He wanted to go to college on a scholarship. He wanted to play

professionally. But then…”

He felt the guilt tear open a wound he had long closed, but Hitoshi’s eyes narrowed. “Then Kamoshida was gone for a day or two, out with a *serious injury* . Do you know what he did to his team when he returned?”

Akihiko was glad that he didn’t leave him time to answer before Hitoshi continued. “He beat the hell out of them. My brother was terrified Kamoshida was going to *kill* them all that he asked our parents for a transfer.”

“Then why didn’t anyone *say* anything?!”

“Because *no one cared!”*

Akihiko took a deep breath before addressing him again. “Look, I did everything I could to get him out of that school. I wanted to arrest him when he broke Sakamoto’s leg, but I couldn’t.”

His partner was silent again, hopefully coming to terms with the fact that Akihiko felt *terrible* for what had happened, but it wasn’t *his fault* . Hopefully. Or maybe Hitoshi was steaming even more because he *couldn’t* do anything to stop Kamoshida.

“Why did you attack him then? Why try to *kill* him? Was that your only option left? Did you not *think* about who would suffer the most?!”

Akihiko opened his mouth, but quickly closed it. He couldn’t come right out and tell him that Kamoshida had spoken about his daughter in a light he *never* wanted to hear from anyone. “He just…said something to me that angered me.”

The glare was back in the man’s eyes. “He *said* something to you? He didn’t *beat* you or threaten *your* life so you could at least claim self-defense?!”

He clenched his fists by his sides. “It wasn’t my life that I was worried about.”

“You sure as hell didn’t care about those he assaulted *after* your

little beat down!”

He knew he was walking on thin ice right now. A part of Akihiko wanted to tell him the truth (maybe leave out Makoto’s relation to him), but as of right now, he couldn’t trust Hitoshi with that kind of information. Especially after telling him to watch his back…

“There’s a lot of things in my life that I regret doing,” he said, taking one step towards the seething rookie in front of him. Something about his advance caught Hitoshi off guard, his spine straightening and the glare fading from his eyes. “But you don’t understand what happened. Or how frustrating it is, knowing that you can’t do a *damn* thing, when you know exactly what that man was doing to his players, those students, but nothing you say is *good enough* .”

“Your bosses make it sound like you’re short tempered and volatile.”

Hell, maybe he was. “It’s easy to get angry when a man comes in and makes sexual comments about some of the girls he wanted to sleep with.”

A flash of understanding came over Hitoshi’s face along with a surprised gasp. “You knew about Suzuki-san?”

No, he didn’t, but he could easily guess what her involvement had been. “I wasn’t told any names.”

His partner was quiet again, but Akihiko didn’t last too long before he rubbed his face with his hands. “I reacted in the heat of the moment over a few words. I shouldn’t have attacked him. My intention was not to infuriate Kamoshida further. I’m sorry for what my actions have brought to your brother, to that team, to everyone.”

My daughter.

He heard Hitoshi sigh heavily. “Well, regardless of your intention, it happened.” His partner made a move to walk off, then stopped. “Your apology isn’t going to be enough to give hope back to my brother, or that team, or those girls he went after.” A final glare from Hitoshi took the last shred of the fight out of him. “I hope your actions haunt you for the rest of your life.”

Hitoshi's words stung more harshly than he would admit. However, no matter how guilty he felt, Akihiko would have easily reacted the same way if he was ever granted a do-over. "Well then, I fully expect you to keep your eyes on me. Make your judgments. And then you can see for yourself if I'm as short-tempered and volatile as the brass thinks I am."

The young man frowned. "I plan on it."

Their conversation made things that much harder to deal with when he finally got home. Both Minako and Makoto had gone to bed, but he did a quick check on his daughter before going to his room. He poked his head through the door to make sure she was asleep, which she seemed to be anyway, so he fully stepped into her room. He swallowed hard, finding it difficult to look at her for too long before he walked back out of her room like a frightened animal.

Would Makoto ever be the same again? Would he ever see her smile, or see a smile on her mother's face after they both had a nice talk? Or would she be forever trapped in her own fears and hate *him* for not protecting her?

"That's why he went after Niijima-senpai. Because he was angry with you."

"I hope your actions haunt you for the rest of your life."

Not to his surprise, Minako was still awake when he closed the bedroom door behind him. She lowered the book in her hand to the comforter around her and smiled at him. "Welcome home."

He could tell she knew something was wrong when he made a pitiful attempt to put a smile on his face. She patted the spot beside her on the bed and he knew better than to disobey her. However, she held up a hand to stop him right before he sat down. Instead of telling him why she had stopped him, she hopped off the bed and walked around to stand in front of him.

"You are super cute in this uniform, by the way," she said as her hands started undoing the knot of his tie. She giggled when he couldn't contain his blush. "But you look so much better out of it."

Usually Minako had to nudge him a few times before he caved, but a month's worth of emotions came pouring out of him the second her words left her lips. He *needed* her, to be reminded that she loved him, that everything was okay and he was not a horrible human being who would forever be drowning in his misery.

He pushed her into him with a hand on the back of her head and kissed her. He was more rough than he should have been with her, than he had *ever* been with her, but she never pushed him away. She didn't stop him when he, quite literally, tore her clothes off. She didn't stop him when he pinned her to the mattress beneath him. The only time he heard her speak (or at least registered her voice) was after he dropped his head to her shoulder, trying to catch his breath, and apologized into her skin.

"I love you, Aki."

She pulled the last ounce of strength from him and he collapsed on top of her. She planted a chaste kiss to his temple, one of her hands tracing patterns on his back and her other softly brushing through his hair. He felt terrible for treating his own wife like an object, a stepping stone to make himself feel better, when in the end, he felt *worse* . He was so disgusted with himself that he pushed himself off of her, rolled to her side, and threw an arm over his eyes.

"I'm sorry."

He felt her press herself into his side and one of her hands landed on his chest. "Why are you sorry?"

Was that all he was ever going to be? An angry, impulsive man who couldn't do *anything* to protect the people he loved? He figured at some point he would either grow numb to everything or it would have faded all together, but it kept getting *worse* . It kept killing him, bringing him back, and forcing him through another cycle.

"Aki."

Her tone was demanding, but he couldn't bring himself to look at her. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

Her quiet laughter threw him off for a second. “Oh, you didn’t hurt me.” Her fingers began to dance over the plane of his chest. “I actually like it when you take control like this. It’s nice.”

Well, that sure as hell wasn’t what he expected to hear. Minako chuckled at him as she pushed into him more. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

He hated admitting his fears, his regrets, his insecurities to anyone. Except her. It was like she reached into his heart and grabbed everything that was hurting him and crushed it all in the palm of her hand. It was some strange power she had, even when they were younger, but it meant so much more to him as the years had gone by.

“Sometimes, I want to quit everything. I don’t want to help anyone. I’m tired of my actions coming back to haunt me. I’m tired of losing the people I care about, or feeling like I’m losing them.” His hands tightened into fists. “I’m tired of feeling like this.”

Minako’s fingers continued to move along his skin until she grabbed his wrist covering his face. When he didn’t look at her, she forced him to. He was surprised to see a smile on her face. “You’re not a bag guy, Aki. I wouldn’t still be here if you were.”

“But-,”

She leaned over and silenced him with a kiss. Her free hand stroked the side of his face and brushed into his hair. “I think you have too big of a heart. You want to make everyone happy, but you can’t. No matter how hard you try, no matter what you do, someone will always find a way to be miserable.”

“I don’t have a big heart.”

She kissed him again. “It’s easy to let the sadness consume you. Trust me. Some days, I’m glad that you and Makoto aren’t around more often or you both would be far too worried about me.”

He made a move to sit up, but she pushed him back down. “Aki, sometimes I get overwhelmed by the fact I can’t help *you* be happy.

I can go out and talk to strangers like they are my best friends, but then I come home and can't talk to you. So I get it. But you have to keep fighting. Because the people you help, the people you love, they are worth it." He reached out to place a hand to her cheek. "The sorrow, the hurt, the fear…everything is worth it to me if I can just make you *happy,* even if it's for a single second . "

He held her face between his hands and one of hers wrapped around his wrist. "I don't know what I've done to deserve you."

Her laughter warmed his heart and he felt himself smiling at her. "You never had to do anything."

They both fell into a comfortable silence as Minako curled up next to him again. He placed one hand over the one she had on his chest and his other wrapped around her shoulders and found its way into her hair. It was late, far past the time she would normally be asleep, but her fingers kept moving, weaving in and out of his own or trailing over his skin. He paused after almost an hour of it, worried that she was trying to coax him to sleep, and shifted himself to lay on his side.

"You're tired."

She offered him a half-smile. "I'm the one who can sleep whenever I want."

He moved some strands of hair behind her ear, his fingers lingering for a minute or two before he pulled back. His gaze never leaving hers, he whispered, "I love you, Minako."

He felt his face warm when she broke out into a full-blown smile. Her eyes watered, but she never cried. "I hope you never forget this feeling, Aki." She used a hand to pull him into her for a quick kiss. "This will be all the reason you need to keep fighting. And if you ever need a reminder, I'll be more than happy to go through all of this again."

She winked at him, and he was flustered for a second, then he laughed. "We're getting too old for this."

“I would do anything if I could see that smile for the rest of my life.”

Despite the fact that he still couldn’t see the light at the end of the tunnel, it was nice to have someone urging him on through the darkness.

And he would fight. Because he loved her.

Chapter 32

Chapter 32

Monday: Amamiya would either hang out with Sakamoto or head to the library. Both boys would remain on school grounds, usually running out in the field or having a conversation by the stairwell. She didn't bother trying to get too close, so the conversations could have been important, but she doubted it. Nothing dark and devious would be planned where classmates could easily overhear them.

Tuesday: Amamiya would go to work at the convenience store in Shibuya. Nothing that he would do on his way to the store stood out as odd. She couldn't stick around and wait for him to leave, so she left a question mark on the bottom of her notes.

Wednesday: Amamiya would head to the underground mall. He would speak with Takamaki, then head out with her to a place that she wasn't willing to follow behind them to. She really didn't want to know if they were dating, and if they were, she didn't need to be in their business.

Thursday: Amamiya returned to his job at the store.

Friday: She couldn't find a consistent routine. Half of the time, she couldn't find *him* . She would roam around the school one week, go out into the city the next, but she never discovered his secret hiding place. If he was hiding. It was the only day that she couldn't give him an alibi.

Saturday: Amamiya would head home. Or, at least, he would take the train to *get* home. She didn't follow him just in case he questioned why she would be out in Yongen-Jaya. She had never been to that area before, so she told herself it would ruin her cover if he caught her way out there.

Sunday there was no school, so it was impossible to track his movements.

However, Makoto was starting to notice that he was going out of his way to *avoid* her. Not that it really bothered her, but Amamiya had been purposely making himself known to her for the first few weeks after he arrived in Tokyo. Then, suddenly, he wanted nothing to do with her. Granted he didn't have a reason to "protect" her anymore, it only made her think more about *why* he was hiding.

Did…was he trying to *flirt* with her and it went right over her head? Is that why he gave up on her and went for someone else? Not that Makoto wanted a boyfriend, but she didn't want to hurt his feelings. That had to have been why he wasn't making contact with her anymore. She *did* reject his offer when she caught him after school that day…

But, wouldn't he have already been with Takamaki? Why would the two of them be together after school doing whatever they were doing (not studying, at least not in the library) if he was trying to be with her?

Makoto sighed heavily as she took her seat in the station after school. Young love was something she would *never* understand.

She grabbed her book from her bag, an actual *entertaining* book that she had bought a few days ago after she had finished her previous book following Amamiya around town. She knew he was likely going to be headed to his job in Shibuya, since it was Thursday, but it was easier to follow him from a smaller station like Aoyama-Ichome than meeting him in Shibuya Station. Plus, she had a list of things she needed to get from the store anyway.

Maybe another box of chocolate would make her mom stop being so cold to her. Not that she had accepted the first one…

But when she checked her phone to see what time it was, something uncomfortable crept into her heart. If Amamiya wanted to make it to his shift on time, he was running *very* late. Did she miss him? He had always gone to work on Tuesdays and Thursdays. There was no way that after three weeks of tracking his footsteps that he would change things up.

Right?

Right.

Makoto hopped on the next train to Shibuya. Maybe she could call her mother and tell her that she would be late that evening, if she cared, and then she could follow Amamiya around once his shift was over. That way, she could at least tell herself that he was clean on the nights she hadn't been able to stick around.

However, she was *highly* disappointed when Amamiya wasn't standing behind the counter when she went to cash out. She thought about asking the friendly young lady if he had a certain schedule, hours he tended to work, but then realized that was a red flag he could use against her. She didn't want him to know she had been tailing him for weeks just so she could figure out why her gut feeling was telling her he was up to something.

She heaved a sigh and stepped out into the street, clutching her single purchase of sweets for her mom against her chest. Where was Amamiya? Why didn't he show up to work? Was he sick? Did something happen after school? Did he…

"Looking for someone?"

Makoto clamped her mouth shut to hide her gasp, but then she felt the air rush out of her lungs. Of all people she thought she'd run into, her *father* was not one of them. "W-What are you doing here?"

"I *work* here, Makoto."

Makoto took a step back. "I thought you worked in Shinjuku?"

His glare only made her insides squirm. "I've been transferred here until they realize I had nothing to do with Kamoshida's sudden change of heart."

Was he in trouble at work? Was that why her mom had been so angry? Is that why *he* seemed so angry? She held out the box to hopefully convince him of *why* she was out and about in Shibuya.

"I bought…Mom some sweets." She kept her voice down, but she knew he heard her. Sadly, he didn't buy her pitiful excuse and stepped towards her with the look he used to give her as a child

when he *knew* she was lying.

“Amamiya says you’ve been harassing him.” The box in her hands fell to the ground. Did…did Amamiya *know* she was following him? How?! “Why would he say that to me?”

Makoto knew if she looked away from him, he would know she was up to something. But she couldn’t help it. He could be very intimidating when he wanted to be. “When did he tell you this?”

“That doesn’t matter.” He lowered himself to her eye level, forcing her to look at him again. “Why are you following him around?”

A slight part of her grew angry with her dad. Why was he being so cold to her over something someone else said about her? Why couldn’t he defend *her* , even if she really was doing what he said. Thanks to that thought, she was able to straighten her back and face him without cowering. “I’m not doing anything wrong.”

A small pang of fear came into her heart as he narrowed his eyes at her. “Stalking is a form of harassment, Makoto. If he made a formal complaint, we could look into it. And you’re an adult now.”

Her fear was wiped out of her mind and she met his glare with one of her own. “I’m not *stalking* him.”

“Then tell me what’s going on.”

Makoto shook her head. “Why? So you can pit my word against his?”

Her dad was quiet for a few seconds, then, “Is this why you’ve been so distant? Because you *know* you’re doing something wrong and you didn’t want to tell us?”

She really didn’t want to have a heart to heart with him in a busy street with high school teenagers walking around. Hell, she didn’t even want to have this heart to heart with him at home. “It had to have just been a coincidence. I’m not following him around, okay?”

She turned to leave, but he grabbed her upper arm and spun her back around. “Don’t lie to me.”

He had a good grip on her, but she managed to pull away. “I have nothing to say to you, *Sanada* .”

She began walking off before his pained expression made her stay and apologize. Her heart was racing the rest of the way home, despite trying to calm herself down with deep breaths. To make things worse, she forgot that she had dropped her hopeful apology for her mom and walked into the apartment empty-handed.

She considered it a breath of fresh air when her mother wasn’t home.

The next few days were a blur to her, but the more she holed herself up in the student council room after school, her thoughts began to run away with her.

Her mom didn’t love her anymore.

Her dad wouldn’t believe her anymore.

She was alone.

Well, she could still talk to Sis, maybe, if she felt comfortable approaching her while she was working, which she always was. But that was the only thing she had going for her.

She suddenly missed Amamiya’s kindness. At least he would keep her from drowning in her own thoughts. Mentioning him to her mom always made her happy, even if nothing was going on between them. Even if she felt something off about him…

But that next Sunday changed everything.

Makoto had only gone out to clear her mind, unable to sit in a stuffy apartment with her mother for too long. That was when Ichiryusai Madarame, a man she had overheard some students talking about over the past few weeks, appeared on the TV screen above her head.

He was weeping.

He was pleading.

He was *confessing* .

Her eyes were glued to the screen, but her ears picked up on a conversation around her. “There were these cards placed all over his exhibit! The Phantom Thieves did it! That’s so cool!”

The Phantom Thieves .

That feeling in her stomach made her slightly nauseous. Did Amamiya go after someone else? But…why Madarame? How did he even *know* him? Makoto didn’t know what this man had done until he said so over the air. Kamoshida had been personal. But this was a stretch.

If he was somehow involved, it didn’t give him a right to go around and bother every single bad guy he could find. Did that make Madarame the victim? No, but this wasn’t the kind of justice that should have been dealt.

The public announcement had been overkill. The Phantom Thieves weren’t doing this for any other motive than for the glory.

She sat down at the dinner table when she got home, thankful that her mom had at least made her a plate rather than throwing it in the fridge. Her dad wasn’t home, but she was actually relieved. She would hate to have the conversation that was weighing on her heart with him around.

“Can I ask you something?”

It wasn’t how she should have started things, but at least her mom looked up at her. “Sure.”

Why are you so mad at me? “D-Did you hear about Madarame?”

Her mom went back to her meal, seemingly uninterested. “I have not.”

Makoto forced herself to sit up straight and *talk* to her. “The Phantom Thieves made him confess his crimes on public television today.”

When she remained silent, Makoto swallowed hard. “It’s, um, the same group that made Kamoshida break down and confess, supposedly.”

“Why are you telling me all of this?”

She leaned back in her seat, suddenly afraid of her mother for the first time in her life. “D-Did I do something to upset you?”

Her mom breathed out a sigh, then pushed her plate away from her. “If you don’t want me to be a part of your life, Makoto, then I’ll respect your decision.”

Oh. “W-What?”

She watched her wipe a hand over her face. “Your silence has been bothering me for weeks. You don’t speak to me, *at all* . So I figured you didn’t want to talk. But yet here you are, suddenly bursting with things to tell me.”

Makoto wiped her hands over her skirt and dropped her head to hide a wave of tears that came to her eyes. “I-I’m sorry, Mom.”

She only lifted her head again when she heard the chair scrape against the floor. “If you don’t finish your dinner, put it away.”

“Mom, wait.” It had been hard as hell to say, but she was relieved to know her mom heard her. “I didn’t mean to hurt you. I just…” She took a deep breath to hold back her tears, her head falling to her chest again. “I just don’t want you to have to worry about me.”

She gave herself a few moments to reign in her emotions before she lifted her head. She was impressed that her mom was still standing a few steps away. There was a different expression on her face, something calming rather than intimidating, which Makoto was grateful for, then she walked up to where she sat at the table.

“I’ve had the same issue with your father in the past, Makoto, but he was much easier to read. I just don’t know what else to do.” Her mom pulled out a nearby chair and sat down. “So first, I want you to tell me why you’ve been so distant.”

Odd that her dad had wondered that very same thing the last time she saw him. “The principal at school asked me to find out who was responsible for Kamoshida’s change.”

“The principal asked you?”

She nodded. “So…I’ve been trying to find proof by following someone I think may know about what happened.”

Her mom gave her a curious look, then asked, “Well?”

Makoto took another deep breath. “The transfer student, Amamiya.”

Her mom exhaled and for a second, she worried that she was going to come to his defense like her father would have if he were there. “And it bothers you?”

Makoto already had an explanation ready to toss out, but she was caught off guard by her mother’s question. “Huh?”

“This is why you’ve been quiet. You can’t justify reporting someone who helped you.”

She needed to give her mother more credit. Either that or she *really* needed to take some facial expression lessons. “Well, I haven’t really found anything anyway. But if I did, I don’t know what I should do. Kamoshida was hurting people and the principal didn’t stop him. Dad couldn’t stop him. But now all of the sudden, Kamoshida is a *victim* rather than a culprit.”

She bit her lip to keep herself from yelling, but a smile made its way over her mom’s face. It was nice to see it again. “You’re a lot like your father.”

She didn’t tell her that her *father* wouldn’t stick up for her and would rather put blind faith in someone he barely knew. “Well, things kind of changed with what happened today with Madarame.”

“And what happened with this guy to change your mind?”

“Well,” she started, her hands flattening out against her thighs. “Kamoshida was a direct threat to the school. So if Amamiya had

something to do with it, how did he find out about Madarame? Why did his confession have to be publicized for the city to see? A lot of things I was willing to overlook with Kamoshida, I can't now."

"Why don't you ask him?"

Makoto stiffened in her seat. "What?"

Her mom smiled again and repeated herself. "Why don't you ask him?"

One, she didn't believe Amamiya would be forthcoming. Two, if he *did* know about her following him, he was likely very unhappy with her. Three, she worried that she wouldn't have the courage to ask.

"I know it won't be easy, Makoto," her mom said as she pushed her chair back. "But sometimes, the best options aren't always the easiest ones to make. You should tell him how you're feeling. Maybe he'll understand and help."

Despite herself, a blush made its way over her cheeks. "What if he tells me he did something?"

"I don't really see this boy doing anything wrong."

"But what happened with Madarame was-,"

"So he finds corrupt people and does what the police can't do." Her mom placed a hand on her shoulder. "Your dad might not like for me to tell you this, but I think what this group is doing is a good thing."

"It's wrong."

A small chuckle came from her mom. "Life isn't always black and white, Makoto. Trust me."

Makoto only wished she could say as much to the principal.

He called her into his office after school the next day. She knew what he wanted to talk about the second she saw his expression.

"Why haven't you submitted any information to me about the

Phantom Thieves?”

Well, she really didn’t *have* anything except a gut feeling, but she wouldn’t tell him that. “There’s not a lot I can look into with the bizarre nature of the events.”

“They went after someone else! The media is going to start thinking we are harboring criminals!”

Makoto clenched her fists at her side. Because *Kamoshida* wasn’t a criminal… “There’s no evidence that anyone from Shujin wrote those cards, or any evidence that would lead to a more specific age range. They may not even be teenagers.”

She hoped her logic had made enough sense that the principal would send her on her way. But he did the exact opposite.

“You either find out who did all of this or I will talk to people I know in the police department who can get that cop friend of yours fired for his part in all of this!”

Makoto fell back on her feet as if he had slapped her. It took her several seconds to find her voice again. “You can’t be serious.”

The principal actually smirked at her, knowing he had hit a chord. “Until you can rule him out as the one behind all of this, I’m going to assume he did it all. I know he’s on his last strike with the brass for his assault on Kamoshida. I could just accuse him of all this foolishness and he would be gone the next second.”

Her nails dug into the palms of her hands. She certainly didn’t anticipate being *blackmailed* by the principal. She might be at odds with her dad for the time being, but she knew what would happen if he lost his job.

Chaos.

Her parents would get divorced.

Sae would be the happiest person alive.

And she would be caught in the middle.

“I understand.”

Her mother told her that the world wasn’t black and white. Well, now Makoto believed her.

All she saw was red.

Chapter 33

Chapter 33

It was another odd cycle of emotions before they brought down another crooked adult.

He was angry with Niijima-senpai for stalking him. He was disappointed when Morgana told him he learned nothing from her confrontation with Sanada. (At least it happened, and in *his* defense, according to the cat.) He was *horrified* when he stupidly followed Mishima and Ryuji to some vacant apartment and they *abandoned him* with a maid that turned out to be *his homeroom teacher!* He was proud that his team, now including Yusuke, could bring Madarame to his knees with little injury to them all.

Overall, he felt good. The little annoyances waned themselves out. Ren reminded himself that the big things in life, like taking men like Kamoshida and Madarame out of their “stronghold” and into a prison cell, were far more important.

However, those *little annoyances* were like a gnat flying around his ear. Always there, no matter how many times he tried to swat it away peacefully.

It was time to put an end to this *stalker* of his.

She wasn’t even *good* at it! Morgana had made it seem like she had been utterly *shocked* when Sanada had brought it to her attention. Did she really think he didn’t *know?* Did she always walk around a busy area like Shibuya with a book shoved in her face? How the hell had she not been hit by a car, or a person, or a wall that she couldn’t tell was there?!

Ren had to change his schedule around, but she was quick to catch on. She was tenacious, he would give her that, but he was sure that wasn’t a *good* thing since it revolved around exposing him. Well, whatever. He was done playing cat and mouse with her. He was done trying to be the good guy. If she wanted a criminal, he could

show her one.

No, he wouldn't, but he sure as hell wanted to.

He walked into the store in Shibuya, knowing it was a day she thought he would work. He waved politely to the young lady, but when she asked him if he was working, he told her he had other things planned. She didn't seem to mind and returned her attention to the customers.

Ren wandered around, keeping himself out of sight as best he possibly could. A grin split across his face when he eyed the box of chocolate Niijima-senpai had bought the first time she stopped in the store. There was nothing fantastic about it, which should have been something that alerted him back then that she was up to something. He just didn't want to believe that she would follow him around rather than come up to him and ask him about whatever was on her mind.

Girls were confusing. Especially the cute ones.

He broke out from his thoughts when he heard Morgana yawn loudly. "This is so boring! We could have gone to Mementos!"

Ren replaced the box of sweets and continued to look around the isle. Niijima-senpai really liked her candy, or she was buying it for someone else. Not a boyfriend, maybe, but he chuckled to himself. If she was stalking *him* , he doubted the girl would have the time for one.

If only she was following him around to give him the box of chocolates or the books she liked to hide behind.

And a few seconds later, she walked through the door. Ren picked up another box and examined it carefully, feigning interest in case someone not involved found *him* to be the weird one. He didn't even have to wait long before he saw her come around the corner and stop a few steps away from where he stood.

He didn't look over at her, but he smirked nonetheless. "It's good to see you, Niijima-senpai."

She was quiet, completely still, and very surprised to see him. It was a cute look, but Ren knew that ship had long since sailed. “Are you here to buy some more chocolate? I don’t really see what’s so special about them.”

He turned to her and handed her the box in his hand. Her eyes fell to it, but her arms remained by her sides. He shook it, hoping to get her to move, but when that didn’t work, he chuckled.

“So you *do* have a boyfriend.”

It was what made her look back up at him. “I don’t have a boyfriend.”

A pity. “I figured that.” He leaned his shoulder against the rack next to him. “After all, he would probably be jealous of all the time you spend following me around.”

Oddly enough, something about the way she frowned at him made him slightly guilty. Her eyes narrowed, that red color starting to come to life. “Maybe if you weren’t so suspicious, I wouldn’t have to.”

“So, Sanada sent you after me?”

Ren was pretty sure he heard her growl under her breath. “He seems to have taken a liking to you.”

Morgana had said much the same thing, but her reaction was a bit unexpected. Was she mad at a cop for telling her to *back off?* Had she not done anything wrong (annoying was a better word), then maybe she had a right to be angry with the man.

But she did. “You’re stalking me. So if you want to know something, just ask.”

She turned her head sharply and her hand went to the strap around her shoulder. “Have a good night.”

The tone she used with him shook him. She was seriously *pissed* over something that was her fault! He wasn’t about to apologize for being smart enough to catch her following him around at every turn. He wasn’t about to apologize that a cop she had known for years finally came down on her for doing something wrong. He had no

reason to apologize to her for anything.

But no matter how many times he said that, he still felt *bad* .

Even with Morgana in his bag telling him to go home, he was able to catch Niijima-senpai a block away from the store. He caught her wrist and pulled her back and he stepped into the small alleyway to give them some privacy.

“Look, if you have a reason for doing whatever you’re doing, tell me. Stop treating me like a criminal.”

She refused to look at him and he noticed her hand tightening around her shoulder. They stood in silence for a few minutes, then Ren started to grow uncomfortable. He ran a hand through his hair and sighed loudly.

“I know you’re not following me because you’re madly in love with me, so you can at least tell me *why* you’re annoying me with this.”

She pulled her arm from his grip and he worried she was going to take off. She made a move to leave, but that was when he realized they weren’t alone.

“Hey there, kids. Wanna score some easy cash?”

Great. Trapped in an alleyway with a girl who disliked him and two hasslers. Regardless of the fact these guys looked like pushovers, they also looked like they could strike without warning. Maybe even with a weapon. He had to tread lightly.

Makoto took a different approach. “We’re not interested, so leave us.”

Ren knew she was angry, but she was directing that anger towards people who could have been dangerous. What the hell was she thinking?

One of the men took a step towards her, but Makoto didn’t even flinch. “It’s a simple job for quite a bit of money.” He made a move to grab her arm, but Ren put himself between the two of them.

“We’re not interested.”

The man glared at him, turned back to his buddy, then nodded. “Fine. Keep that stick up your ass, kid.”

Ren felt his shoulders drop with his exhale, relieved to know nothing had really gone wrong. Until, “What kind of job is this?”

His eyes widened as he quickly turned around to face Makoto, who appeared deep in thought, but thinking about the *wrong things!* The two men smiled at each other before they stepped back into the alley with them.

“Sounds like you’re changin’ your mind, sweetheart. Good for you.”

He kept himself between her and the two punks, but when Makoto moved around him, he was suddenly at a loss of what to do. She couldn’t *seriously* be thinking about taking this job. It was likely dangerous. Or even worse, *illegal* . “Makoto, stop.”

She looked over at him in surprise, likely because he had referred to her by her first name, but then she glared at him. “I know what I’m doing.” She turned her attention back to the men in front of her. “I’m assuming whatever you’re going to ask of me is illegal.”

Oh. Ren didn’t know which option he wanted to happen *less* : Makoto asking about the job because she was interested or Makoto calling them out about the job because it was illegal. Was she always like this? Or was she just so pissed off at him (for something *she was doing!)* that she wasn’t thinking properly?

The snarl on both of the men’s faces made his heart drop into his stomach. “You’re crazy, kid.”

Makoto, however, continued to antagonize them. “So it’s true then. How many other teenagers have you been harassing?”

Ren got to the point where the glaring became too much. One man put his hands in his pockets and he panicked. He grabbed Makoto’s wrist and pulled her down the alley, knowing that there was another way out back to the main street. (One of the perks from her stalking him was that he knew the alleyways like the back of his hand.) She,

of course, told him to let her go, that she was fine and she knew what she was doing, but he refused. In fact, his grip tightened and he had to be more forceful with her to get her to stay beside him.

They finally came around the corner and out by the main road across from the station. It wasn't overly crowded yet since it was early evening, but he appreciated that. It made him feel safe, but he could still have a conversation with the girl beside him without raising alarm bells in hundreds of people.

"What the hell was that?"

She ignored him and took a step towards the intersection when he grabbed her hand again. She fought in his grip (again), but with people around, he worried someone would get the wrong idea, so he let her go. However, he kept up with her as she crossed the street to the station.

"That guy could have been grabbing a weapon. What is wrong with you?!" He was met with silence again and he groaned loudly enough that she came to a stop. Thankfully. "This has to end. I'm tired of you following me around. If you want to get yourself into trouble, fine, but don't include *me* ."

That glare was back in her eyes. "You're already in enough trouble, aren't you?"

He couldn't come out and tell her about the secret life of the Phantom Thieves lest she use it against him. Was that why she was stalking him? To look for clues? But…why would she after the whole ordeal with Kamoshida? He thought if anything she would understand. Which is why he thought someone had put her up to it. But it clearly wasn't Sanada, so…

"You're doing this for the principal."

Her entire expression fell and the glare was gone. Yeah, he liked little guessing games with her. She was *far* too easy to read. But as soon as the shock passed, there was another look in her eyes.

Fear.

She was afraid.

She tried to cover it up (ineffectively) by giving him a hard stare, but the fire in her eyes from earlier was drowned out by the mist of tears. Ren could feel something poke him in the chest.

Maybe she didn't *want* to do any of this, but she was *forced* to. It would explain why she was so terrible hiding her trail. He took a step towards her, but she took a matching step back. He lifted his hand to reach out to her, but it fell back to his side.

"If you're in some kind of trouble, you can tell me."

"You can't protect me."

That poke from before became something a bit stronger. "What?"

"I don't need anyone's help."

He couldn't form words fast enough to stop her. She disappeared into the station and he took a deep breath. At least he knew what was going on to some degree. Why the principal wanted information on him, he could guess, but there was no real proof he had done anything wrong. And if the man thought he was guilty, why not threaten *him?* He could expel him, report to his probation officer, throw him back *in jail* without any kind of evidence. So why was the man blackmailing Makoto when he could have gone straight to the source? And why would Makoto go along with it?

Was it all for a better recommendation letter like Ann had always told him? No. This was personal. It had to be. Makoto had been so *angry* . And while he never enjoyed the feeling of her eyes on him, she never had that rage to her expression when he would catch her hiding behind her books.

Something had to have happened recently, but he had no idea what could have pissed her off so much. Granted he didn't know her all that well, but she didn't strike him as the kind of person who would bottle things up for days until it became too much.

Ren didn't see her for a few days, but Morgana assured him she hadn't been following him. He grew curious as to why. If she needed

information on him to pass to the principal to clear her name or whatever he had threatened her with, then she should still be on his case.

He got his answer when Kawakami-sensei told him Niijima-senpai wanted to speak to him after class.

On his way up the stairs, Morgana couldn't help but shoot out ideas. "Maybe she caught us going into Mementos? No, I would have known she was around. Maybe she has someone else tracking you? Maybe a coworker? Maybe Ryuji said something without knowing it?"

That was what it was. Ren had let Makoto walk off after Ryuji and Ann had their slightly louder than acceptable conversation about their work. Ann had managed to shoo her away, but…had she overheard them?

He was going to murder Ryuji.

"Take a deep breath, Ren. Even if she does know, she has no proof."

Morgana's words proved to be his strength as he opened the door to the student council room. Makoto leaned back against a desk, her phone in her hand, then she tilted her head up to greet him. Ren felt the room grow ten degrees colder and he swallowed a lump building in his throat. A hand motioned for him to take a seat, her eyes never leaving his own, but he did as he was commanded. She took a seat across from him, her face blank, her eyes roaring with life, and his heart pounded away like he was running a marathon.

"I've asked you here to discuss this."

She cut right to the chase, thank gods, or Ren thought he would have had a nervous breakdown. She dropped her phone to the table in front of him and hit the play button on a recording. The second he heard Ryuji's voice shouting the words *Phantom Thieves,* he knew he was in hot water.

"I know you're one of them."

Morgana spoke up. “She can’t prove that. It was Ryuji’s voice on the recording! You’re okay!”

He felt far from okay as her eyes narrowed at him. She *knew* he was getting nervous. The small upwards turn of her lips made him more aware of how stiff he was sitting in his chair.

“I have a picture to go with this, in case you don’t believe this could come back on you.”

Aside from a small sense of fear taking over, the longer he stared back into her eyes, the more angry he became. He didn’t know what had motivated her to get this kind of information, but *damn it* , she was going to take away his freedom. All for what? Because he had been nice enough to help her when she needed help? If he would have kept his distance, would she be doing all of this now?

He tried to bite back the bitterness, but he was sure she could hear it in his voice. “I’m sure the principal will love this.”

She flinched for half a second, but then she covered it up as she reached for her phone. “The picture and this recording will be good enough evidence for him to at least call you in for questioning.” She threw her chair back and stood. “I’ll let him decide what happens from there.”

In a panic, Ren threw his seat back and came to block her from leaving. “Why are you doing this? Because I *helped you* ? Because you didn’t want my help? If you take that to the principal and he somehow believes it, which I’m *sure* he will, I can kiss the rest of my life goodbye.”

Something cold slapped him across the face when she *chuckled* at him. “You’re nervous. Nervous people tend to be guilty.”

He was running out of options. “Is this the kind of thanks I get for taking a man like Kamoshida down? Should I have *let* him do whatever he wanted? He would have *killed* you! No, he would have made you his damn sex slave, and *then* kill you when he was tired of you!”

There was a mix of emotions on her face. She didn't push him out of the way and storm off. She didn't tell him she was going to go through with this regardless of his good deeds. But she wasn't *doing* anything. In his frantic state of mind, he needed her to clue him in on her next course of action.

Surely he could find some way to *reason* with her.

"Then I'll give you a chance."

He couldn't tell if he should be relieved she wasn't going to turn him in or nervous for what she was going to say next. "A chance for what?"

Makoto put her phone in her bag and turned fully to face him. "I want to verify this justice you speak of."

That burning determination glowed in her eyes and Ren had a hard time denying her request. He didn't know how to go about what she wanted from him, but for now, she wasn't going to the principal. *For now.*

"And how do you want me to do that?"

"I need to see what you do."

Ren couldn't help the breath of laughter that came out of his lungs. "You want to see what I do?"

She held his gaze. "I need to know that what you are doing is for the good of the people and not just for your own benefit." Just then, she squeezed her eyes shut, as if trying to fight back a round of tears. She took a deep breath, exhaled, then opened her eyes again. "If you do that, I'll delete the recording and the picture."

Her words did nothing to clue him in on why she was reacting the way she was. However, when she turned to walk out of the room, he reached out and placed a hand on her shoulder.

"I want to help you."

She shook his hand off. "There's several students saying they are in

over their heads with blackmail. Someone is demanding money from the students as a means of keeping their alleged criminal activities from being exposed. Those men who tried to talk to us the other day, I think they are scamming students."

He got an idea of what she was asking of him, but without a name, or even a *starting* point, that made his job very difficult. However, "I want to help *you.* "

Her eyes met his and he felt a small pang of sadness. She looked away to hide her expression from him and he once again placed a hand on her shoulder. "I will look into this, but I know that's not what's bothering you."

She shook her head, but she didn't step out of his reach. "If you prove your actions are just, then I'll be fine."

"Makoto."

His hand tightened on her shoulder when she tried to leave, but he doubted that was why she stopped. He walked to stand in front of her, but she lowered her head to keep him from looking at her.

"What did the principal tell you?"

Another shake of her head, but this one was far weaker. His heart hurt and he lifted his other hand to her other shoulder. He gently shook her to get her to look up at him, but she successfully fought his attempts.

"Please, Makoto."

A knife wedged itself between his ribs when her hand rubbed at her eyes. "You don't deserve to go to jail."

Under different circumstances, he would have smiled and laughed and maybe tried to hug her. But before he could find something to say to her, she straightened out her back and pulled out from his hold. Her quiet voice did critical damage to his heart. "I can give you more details as they come. I suggest you start your search in Shibuya."

He was far too weak to try and stop her again.

Chapter 34

Chapter 34

Makoto knew that reaching out to Sis would likely blow up in her face, but she *needed* someone.

“You know better than to come here, Makoto.”

At least she wasn’t yelling at her, or blackmailing her, or glaring at her, or not speaking at all. She stepped into her sister’s office and stood in front of her desk. “I need to talk to you. I need help.”

Sae exhaled loudly, a hand coming to rest against the side of her head. “What kind of help do you need that you would have to come speak to me directly?”

Did Sis not want to talk to her either? Why was everyone pushing her away? “I just need to talk to someone.”

“Go talk to Minako or Akihiko.”

Makoto fumbled over her words, but she shook her head and tried again. “Please, Sis.”

Another exhale, another stab at her heart. “Make it quick.”

She didn’t waste another second. “The principal at school is blackmailing me for information on the Phantom Thieves and I don’t have anything for him. But if I don’t give him something, then…” She trailed off, looked behind her to make sure the coast was clear, and whispered, “Dad’s going to lose his job.”

Makoto regretted telling Sae that their father’s career was on the line, but surprisingly, Sae took it rather well. Much better than she expected. Maybe there was hope after all…

“What kind of information do you need?”

“Well,” she started, worried that her next line would cause Sae to

snap. “I think I know who it is, but, I don’t want them to get in trouble.”

Sae stopped typing and Makoto braced herself. “Then why are you coming to me?”

“Because I don’t know what to do.”

Her sister’s shoulders dropped and an angry scowl formed on her face. “You’re an adult now, Makoto. This is what happens in the *adult* world. You have to make decisions. *Hard* decisions, then live with the consequences.”

She certainly hadn’t been expecting her to say that. “But I don’t think they’ve done anything wrong.”

Makoto flinched when Sae slammed her hands onto the desk. “Stop being so damn *childish!”*

She took a step back, suddenly afraid of her sister. “I-I’m sorry.”

“You’re as spineless as your father.”

Sae’s words echoed in her mind as she turned and ran home. *Spineless?* How did not wanting to hurt anyone make her spineless? She didn’t want Amamiya to go to jail when he had delivered the proper justice to a man no one else could seem to touch. She didn’t want her father to lose his job, knowing that the domino effect would destroy what was holding her family together right now.

Maybe she was childish. If Sis had to make these kinds of decisions every day, Makoto had a long future ahead of her. However, she thought being an adult was knowing when you were in trouble and having the courage to ask for help…

But she couldn’t speak to her dad. He would be furious and go throw a punch at the principal and probably kill him. She couldn’t tell her mom, despite her desire to, in case she told her dad and she was back to point number one. She tried talking to Sis, but that had ended terribly. She didn’t really have any friends, so…

She ended up crying into her pillow that night, but only because she

told herself it was good for her. She would be back to normal the next morning. She wouldn't let her sister's words bother her. She wouldn't let her dad's judgments keep her down. She would wake refreshed and ready to solve this crisis with a clear head and a steady heart.

She was proud of herself for the first few days, trying to gather more information for Amamiya to use. However, the few students who spoke to her weren't exactly all that giving with information. She couldn't blame them, seeing how they were scared and caged to a mistake they didn't realize they were making, but over the next few days, it proved harder and harder to get what she needed.

However, she soon came to realize that she didn't know *what* Amamiya needed for this whole "changing hearts" thing. So she waited for him after school to ask. She could be more helpful if she knew how to be helpful.

But when she finally saw him, he had friends with him. Two of which gave her the nastiest look they could give her. "The hell you want?"

Her words caught in her throat and she could hear Sae's words again. *"You're as spineless as your father."* She swallowed hard and faced them with clear eyes. "I would like to know what I need to do to help."

"You can back off for starters." Takamaki took a step towards her. "I bet this will all look so good on you when you take the credit for what we do and you toss us all into the trash."

As if her comment didn't sting enough, Sakamoto tossed in his two cents. "We don't need your help. So go put your nose back into a book or something."

Both Takamaki and Sakamoto walked past her and down the street to the station. Her head fell to her chest, not willing to watch the last member of their little group walk away from her, too.

"A name."

Makoto shot her head back up and found Amamiya looking at her

with a neutral expression. He hoisted his bag up over his shoulder and stood next to her facing the opposite way. “We just need the name of whoever is scamming the students. We’ll keep looking, but if you hear anything, let me know.”

She was surprised that he had paused to tell her anything at all, but she nodded once and he was on his way. What good would a name do for him? Well, she wouldn’t question him, seeing as he was at least *kind* to her, unlike Takamaki and Sakamoto.

She also could finally say that the two of them were a part of the group, too. She felt like an idiot for not coming to that conclusion to begin with. That first “calling card” had screamed Sakamoto and he had been one of Kamoshida’s first victims. Takamaki had her friend fall victim to Kamoshida’s abuse, so she likely had it out for the teacher as well. Which would have explained why all three of them were sitting around the vending machines after school that day anyway.

If they needed a name, she would find one for them.

She would prove to everyone that she could take care of herself, that she was strong, a strong *adult* , and she could do the right thing when people thought she was going to break.

Makoto went home shortly after her five second conversation with Amamiya. She knew her dad wouldn’t be home until late, so she thought that if she could somehow sneak into his room and look through his things, maybe she could find something that would help her, or at least point her in the right direction. He worked in Shibuya, for now, hopefully not forever, so it would be her best chance without asking him directly.

A pity she had to do something about her mother.

“You look tired.”

Makoto dropped herself onto the couch and leaned her head against the back. “It’s been a long few days.”

While she was glad her mom wasn’t so mad at her, or giving her the

cold shoulder, she still didn't like it when she pried too much. "How did your mock exams go the other day?"

Her breath came out in a sigh, her hands clasped together on her lap. "Good, I guess."

"You guess?"

She wanted to tell her it wasn't all that important, but she shook her head. "It snuck up on me and I didn't study properly for them."

Her mom chuckled at her. " *You* didn't study?" Makoto shot her a look before her expression softened. "I'm sure you did fine. You just worry too much."

"Or maybe I don't see the point in them."

Makoto stiffened at her own exclamation, but her mother's face remained unchanged. "Talk to me, Makoto."

She took a deep breath to give her some time to gather her thoughts, then she let them tumble out of her mouth. "What good will this kind of knowledge do for me in the future? No matter how hard I study, or try to help people with what I feel I'm good at, I'm always *failing* to make a difference. No amount of education could prepare me for a man like Kamoshida. So what's the point?"

No amount of education could give her what she needed to fix her family. No amount of education could bring down Kamoshida. No amount of education could help out someone who went to great lengths to help her.

She stopped thinking when her mom came to sit right beside her. "Maybe you need to find that answer on your own."

Makoto frowned. "How?"

Her mom smiled. "You're still so young, Makoto. You have so much to learn yet. But these are the kinds of questions that I think you should be asking yourself now. Because if you didn't, you would spend so much time wasting away without a purpose and it would all have been for nothing."

Makoto knew her dad went to college, but her mom chose not to for reasons she didn't feel comfortable asking. However, it was in times like this that she felt her mom knew way more than anyone else she could speak to. Maybe she took online classes when no one was watching?

"Keep studying while you can," came her mother's voice as she stood from the couch. "It's something I know you love to do, so maybe somewhere down the road you can see where it takes you."

She felt a small smile come to her lips. "T-Thank you, Mom."

She bent over to give her a kiss on the head, then her hands went to her hips. "What do you want for dinner?"

Makoto really wasn't hungry, but it usually wasn't a question her mom would ask her. "Um, I don't know."

"Well, don't tell your dad, but I'm really craving some fried chicken."

The way her mother spoke made Makoto chuckle into her hand. "I won't tell him."

There was a light to her mom's eyes that warmed her heart. "He can't keep all the junk food out of the house! Let's go!"

Something hit her right then. This could be the opportunity she had been looking for to dig into her dad's work stuff. So, Makoto waved her hand and pointed down to her bag by her feet. "Would you bring me back something? I have some homework to catch up on."

Whether or not her mom bought her excuse (she actually did have homework…), she nodded to her and walked off to the door. "Don't be so bitter with me if I don't share with you."

She gave her a quick nod and then her mom was out the door. She had no idea where she was going to get dinner, but she told herself to get moving. She grabbed her bag and tossed it into her room to at least give her some sort of alibi, then stood in front of her parents' room.

She hadn't been inside for years, when she had a horrific night terror

and her dad actually carried her back to their room so she could sleep next to them. It was odd, and frankly a little terrifying, but she told herself this was for a mission. She was either going to clear Amamiya or she would condemn him. She wouldn't be stuck in the middle any longer.

If she cleared him, she could make up something to tell the principal to give her more time. Or she wouldn't tell him anything and let her dad take care of himself. He probably could. She was sure that he was liked enough by his coworkers that there would be some kind of riot if he was fired.

She could cross that bridge if it came to that. Now, she needed a name.

After two of the longest minutes of her life from when she first stepped into the room, she finally made it to her father's desk. It was as if an imaginary force was trying to stop her, but she fought through it regardless. If he were to keep anything stowed away at home, it would be here. She was very surprised that he didn't keep any of the drawers or cabinets locked, so she worried that the information she was looking for wasn't going to be there. But she opened files, notebooks, whatever she could get her hands on, hoping there would be *something* she could use. She would not face Amamiya again unless she had something to give him.

In her desperate search for a name, she opened a file and found something that brought her thoughts and feelings to a stop. A picture. It was years old, as it was rare to find a picture with all four of them together. But she was perched up on her dad's shoulders, her mom standing next to him with her hand draped over her sister. They all had a smile (hers was by far the biggest) and Makoto choked on her breath. Her hand covered her mouth to keep herself from crying out loud, even if no one was around to hear her. It had been *years* since she had seen this kind of happiness from any one of her family members. And it hurt her so much knowing that she may never see it again.

There were several other photos, some of them without her or her sister, some of them from when her parents were younger, some with her parents and people she had never met. But in each of them,

everyone was happy. She didn't even recognize her mom or her dad in a few, but they each brought a smile to her face. It rejuvenated her spirit, her desire to help, to be that strength that her mom had told her she could be for the family.

She would see her parents *truly* happy again. She would see her sister happy. They could all take a nice vacation and take more pictures and Makoto could carry them with her to remind herself that the pain and sacrifice was *worth* it.

She briefly wondered if that was why her dad had several pictures of the family stashed away, for when he wanted to give up. She may not be seeing eye to eye with him right now, but she would always support him. She would do whatever she could to keep him safe, free from worry, and out of his misery. She owed him that much, even if it was hard at times to remember that.

So she started her search fresh, determined to keep a good kid out of trouble and her dad out of a depression. If she could help the students being scammed, she could give her dad the credit and the community would support him. And with their support, there would be no way the principal would follow through on his threat.

Yes. That's *exactly* what she had to do.

It was truly a shame that she couldn't find a damn name.

She was running out of time, so she made one last pass over all the pages she had out on the desk. Her dad was known for being meticulous about things, but surprisingly not on paper. No one was ever mentioned by name. No details about crimes that "he" or "she" committed. It was all just a timestamp of events that must have unlocked something in her dad's mind and that was where he kept his information.

But just when she was about to give up hope, she found something. She passed over it the first time because it was in the folder with the pictures, but there were a few names written on the paper. Several had been crossed out, one was still untouched, and the last one at the top was circled multiple times.

Juyna Kaneshiro.

Makoto had no evidence pointing to this person as the one behind the Shibuya problem, and she worried that taking this name to Amamiya would get someone else in trouble. Not that whoever this could be was likely innocent, but she wanted the person involved with *her* problem. She could let her dad take care of the others.

She ran off to her room and typed the name into a search engine on her phone. She didn't know if she was thrilled by the fact there was "no search found" or disappointed by it. She couldn't figure out who this person was if there was no information on him, but if there was no information on him, he might have been that big fish Makoto had been trying to catch.

Regardless, she had one other person to check with before she had to do her own investigating or tossed the name out altogether. She called her sister.

Sae was not too thrilled to speak to her, but she at least picked up. "Are you expecting an apology?"

It would have been nice, but she needed to be strong when talking to Sis. She had to prove she was an *adult* . "Does the name Juyna Kaneshiro mean anything to you?"

Makoto was fairly positive Sae dropped her phone, or something fell, or she imagined her reaction wrong. "H-How did you hear about him?"

She sure as hell wasn't going to tell her where she found out. "I… heard his name in Shibuya."

There was a shuffling of papers in the background. "Why on earth are you roaming about in Shibuya?"

"I go to the gym there with…Sanada sometimes."

Silence. Makoto worried that maybe she should have left out their father's name. Finally, Sae spoke again. "Makoto, this man sent people to *kill* him. You shouldn't be spotted with him or they will target you."

There was uneasiness laced with her words and it knocked Makoto back a step or two. However, once the warmth of her sister's concern for her well-being washed away, it was replaced with something much colder. "Was that when he was stabbed?"

Sae's voice went quiet, but the warning was clear in her tone. "Stay away from Shibuya, Makoto. He's far too dangerous and has hundreds of men working for him. You could easily put yourself in danger without knowing it."

Makoto's heart raced with adrenaline, or happiness, or fear, she couldn't tell. All she knew was that this was likely the name she had been looking for. She would run it by Amamiya at least and let him make the official call. Or whatever he did to pick out a bad guy.

"I will, Sis."

" *Promise* me, Makoto."

Her desperation was enough for her to do just that. "I promise."

Chapter 35

Chapter 35

Akihiko had been looking forward to his day off. But even if Minako said he could go out with her while she ran her errands, he chose not to. She hadn't been offended in the slightest, gave him a quick kiss, then pushed him out of the apartment and told him to go *do* something.

Sometimes he thought she knew him better than *he* did.

Sadly, he found himself strolling around Shibuya like he was on duty. There had been an increase in patrol officers in the area after a few cops had arrested juvenile teenagers selling drugs on the streets. While Akihiko thought this was common, given Central Street was a sort of teenage Kabukicho in his mind, apparently it hadn't been. Not on this scale, anyway.

One kid they had arrested claimed that he was set up. Another said he did it because someone told him to. The stories never aligned, nor did these kids ever drop the name of whoever roped them in to begin with. That had prompted the police force to crack down on the problem and hopefully find out who was at the top of the pyramid before things grew out of control.

However, he didn't have a real reason to be there when he was off. He reminded himself that he never had a reason to roam around Kabukicho either, but he always did. Shibuya wasn't his "home", but he still cared about the people in it. He might not have been able to get to know them as well, only being around the district for about a month, but he wanted to. The more comfortable he could become with the locals, the more they would open up to him. The more they opened up to him, the more information he could gather about events he wasn't actually there to see.

It was still too early for any real criminal activity since school had just let out. He had overheard that some cops had spotted a few students being talked to by mafia looking underlings when they were

on their way to the arcade or café after school. It wasn't his intention to come to the area in order to catch these criminals in the act, but he figured it would give him something to do to get out of his mind again.

Minako had been a blessing in disguise for days now. She spoke with a happiness in her tone he had missed for months, if not years. Her smile was genuine, her laughter more lively, her spirit shining as bright as the day he first realized he loved her.

Makoto, however, was another story.

He knew he was to blame for her change in attitude towards him. He had wanted to clear the air with her, to tell her that he was just worried about her, but she was either at school or asleep. Today would technically be his first chance to speak to her about the "stalker" situation, but he didn't want to dwell on what he would say to her. The more he thought about what he was going to say, the more nervous he would get, and he would eventually tell himself not to speak to her at all.

His mind could be his best friend. Other days, it was his worst enemy.

Makoto wouldn't be arriving home for a few hours yet, if he was lucky, which was why he decided that coming to Shibuya was worth his time. Hell, maybe he would run into her there. Or Amamiya and get a follow-up report on the alleged stalking incident.

An hour passed uneventfully. He couldn't recognize any uniforms of students, but no thugs seemed to be out this early anyway. He ran into a few of his coworkers, had a friendly chat with them, then he walked farther down the street towards the movie theater. He popped into the store, an old habit of his that was hard to break, and walked out with a can of coffee (he needed to go back to Yongen-Jaya) and some dorayaki he found for Minako.

He really needed to remind her that eating this kind of crap was bad for her health.

"Sometimes I think you're *bad for my health."*

He smiled to himself and made his way back towards the station. His eyes lingered on some alleyways in case he could come to some poor kids' defense, but he saw nothing. A black car was parked in one of them, which caught his attention for a second or two, but no one was around that looked like trouble, so he kept walking.

"Didn't peg you as a sweets kind of guy, Sanada-san."

Akihiko came to a stop in the middle of the road and turned to his left. His young "training" partner leaned back against the wall, his eyes narrowing at him when he made eye contact. The kid was off-duty, wearing a plain tank top and shorts instead of a uniform. Hell, Akihiko didn't even think he would have recognized him unless he had spoken to him.

It sent a chill down his spine. How long had Hitoshi been following him around? Why was he following *him* around instead of looking for criminals? "Don't tell my bosses. I would hate to have to be chained to my desk with my secret out. I'd start gaining weight."

Hitoshi's eyes narrowed further. "Maybe I will tell them."

"Look, kid," Akihiko said, taking a step towards him. "Whatever dirt you're trying to find on me, you're not going to get it. Because I have nothing to hide."

"You're friends with those two Shujin students."

So he knew about Akihiko's "relationship" with Amamiya and Makoto. That didn't bother him so much as the fact he had no idea what it was going to take to shake Hitoshi off of him. "Yeah, I am. Both of them helped me gather information on Kamoshida."

"Either one of them suffer at his hands?"

"They both did." He figured there would be no point in denying Makoto's involvement, and he had been pretty sure Amamiya had been on some sort of shit list with Kamoshida since he was friends with Ryuji. He decided to keep molding his half-truth. "And they were both brave enough to talk to me about it, but you can see how that

all turned out."

Hitoshi dropped his head and turned away. "I'm trying really hard to hate you, but you always seem so damn genuine when you talk." He shook his head. "I suggest staying out of trouble, Sanada-san. I would hate to be the one to report back to your bosses because you did something stupid."

Akihiko watched him throw his hands into his pockets and walk down the street. He inhaled deeply and released his breath. It wasn't as if he made plans to run off and pick a fight with some criminal just because he was bored. It wasn't as if he had beat the shit out of Kamoshida just because he hated the man's face. He didn't *enjoy* being put in those kinds of situations where he had to make a snap decision, knowing full well there were serious consequences. But he would love to meet someone who wouldn't have done the same had they been in his shoes.

However, the talk with Hitoshi gave him pause. Would he follow him home and then catch him with Minako or Makoto? Would he follow him to the courthouse if he ever needed (or wanted) to speak to Sae again? He was suddenly thankful for Amamiya's unknowingly important role in his life. If Hitoshi ever grew suspicious of him when he caught Akihiko with Minako, Makoto, or Sae, he could easily throw in Ryuji and Amamiya as more evidence that everyone was a "friend."

He took another deep breath and began making his way to the station. He was annoyed. He was concerned. He really needed to tell Minako that she had to stop eating so much sugar. Maybe he could pick her up something else at the station. It was going to be movie night, so maybe he could bring back a nice bento box for her instead.

He groaned when he got stuck at the Scramble intersection, but a few seconds later, he was glad he did.

He wouldn't miss that crop of blond hair no matter *how* far away Ryuji was.

The kid was flanked by Amamiya and another girl he didn't

recognize, but all three of them had the same look on their face.

Panic .

Amamiya had his phone pressed to his ear and beside him, Ryuji bounced with nervous energy as he waited for the light to change. When it finally did, the three of them and another young man darted across the street faster than a normal group of people should. Even dumb tourists trying to get a snapshot before the crowds reached them.

They were fast enough that he had to push his way through people to make a grab at Ryuji's arm. "Sakamoto!"

The boy turned to him with a scowl. "The hell man! I gotta…" Ryuji blinked and some semblance of realization came to him. "Oh shit man, help us!"

An unsettling weight began to form in his stomach, but before Ryuji could drag him off, he pulled on the arm he managed to snag earlier. "What the hell did you get into now?"

"Ryuji! What the…" The unknown girl raced up to the blond, followed shortly by Amamiya and the other young man. "Oh. Excuse us. We need to get going."

She grabbed Ryuji's other arm, but Akihiko refused to let him go until someone told him what the hell was going on. "Where are all of you running off to in such a hurry?"

He hoped they would tell him they were late for a movie.

He hoped they would tell him they were trying to see who could run the fastest down a semi-crowded street.

He hoped they would tell him they were about to miss some special if they didn't arrive on time.

But Amamiya held a hand to the speaker on his phone and ripped his heart out of his chest. "Niijima-senpai has been kidnapped."

It took several minutes for him to grasp what he had just told him.

Kidnapped? How?! He had been walking around the area for over an hour! How the *hell* would he have missed her?! Why was he still standing around like a soulless cast of a human when *his daughter was in danger!*

Akihiko walked right up to Amamiya and grabbed him by the scruff of his uniform shirt. “You tell me where she is right now!”

The boy seemed afraid of him for a second, but when he shook his head, it was gone. “I don’t know where she is. She overheard us talking and then she said she was going to help us get in contact with…Kaneshiro.”

As if the news Makoto had been kidnapped hadn’t been bad enough…

Akihiko thought he was going to throw up. He released Amamiya as the world around him started to spin. He heard someone trying to talk to him, but it was all white noise. His daughter had been kidnapped by a man that wanted him *dead* . Kaneshiro had likely discovered that Makoto was a weakness, or worse, his *daughter* , over the year the man had been oddly quiet. It was his biggest fear. The whole reason he altered Sae and Makoto’s birth certificates was to keep this from happening.

But it happened anyway.

“Sanada!”

Someone hit him hard in the shoulder and it brought him back to attention. Ryuji stood before him with a worried expression, his fist raised for another punch if he needed to throw one. “You alright?”

Akihiko ran both of his hands over his face to hopefully hide the emotions he was positive they had already noticed. But the longer he stood there, the more his panic began to get the best of him. Was Makoto dead? Was she hurt, afraid, alone? Was she being sold off to some rich fat-cat who would do god knows what to her?!

“She needs you.”

How he had managed to hear anything, he didn’t know, but when he

dropped his hands, Amamiya gave him a hard look. Not judging him for being a horrible father…cop friend…but trying to get *through* to him. “We need to move now if we want to catch her.”

Akihiko had wasted enough time wallowing in his fears and he nodded once to the boy. “Right. You’re coming with me. The rest of you,” he turned quickly to the others. “Go home. Now.”

All three of them opened their mouths to protest, but he walked off long before their words could reach him. He followed Amamiya down the street he had just walked through, then made a sharp turn down an alley.

The same alley where the black car had been parked minutes ago.

He slammed his fist into the closest wall he could find. “Damn it!”

“We need a car. She said she just pulled into a…Club Camelot?”

Had Akihiko been in the right state of mind, he would have asked how Amamiya knew that, but that wasn’t the first thing he needed right now. That was when he saw a quick flash of yellow dart out into the street.

“Someone stop!”

He didn’t know how Ryuji didn’t get hit by a car…

“What the hell Ryuji?”

The blond threw them both a grin when a taxicab stopped a few meters in front of him. “Hey, I got the ride. I’m coming too.”

Akihiko almost told him *no* , but there was no time to argue with the boy. “Get in.” He flashed his badge and told the startled driver where to go and to make it quick. The poor man nodded, but at every light he had to stop at, for every second he wasn’t *there* , he lost himself to his fears again.

Makoto, please be okay.

He didn’t know what he would do if he found her too late, or if he

couldn't find her at all. Despite telling himself he would find her, she would be okay, the images in his head begged to differ. His vision began to blur and his eyes burned like hell. It was way too hot for him, but he had never been more cold in his life. Every single noise fell into the background and he heard nothing. He couldn't control his breathing. His lungs screamed at him to *slow down* . His hands started to tremble, followed by his arms, his shoulders, until he thrust the heel of his palms over his eyes to *stop crying!*

"It doesn't look like they are open."

Akihiko rubbed at his eyes, the world coming into focus once more. Amamiya was the first one out of the cab, but he found his voice in time to stop him. "Wait!"

He couldn't just let this teen run into a dangerous man's lair. He paid the frightened cab driver and stepped out of the car, Ryuji a fraction of a step behind him. "You two stay here. This man is not someone either of you should be dealing with."

Ryuji frowned. "C'mon man! You ain't gonna be able to take them by yourself!"

Watch me . "Stay. Here."

He didn't warn them again as he opened the door (odd that it was unlocked, but lucky for him) and began making his way through the hall. He was familiar enough with these kinds of establishments: bright, flashy décor, plush seating, expensive-looking glassware that reflected the neon lights, but he knew it was only the set-up to lure in customers. A majority of the clubs in Kabukicho were riddled with yakuza and criminals masquerading as friendly customers. Flash a wad of cash at a single, lonely looking young lady, and she was caught in the web before she even knew it.

"Hey buddy, we're closed. Get the fuck out."

His fist landed squarely in the man's face and the guy fell onto his back with a loud *bang* . Another pathetic looking man approached him, but one hook to his face forced him over a table and crashing into the bottles of liquor on the shelves.

But Akihiko kept moving. A guy here and there tried (and failed) to stop him as he walked past the bar and through the velvet curtains he was oh so familiar with. This time, several men, much bigger than the few he had knocked back easily, stood in his way.

“Who the fuck are you?”

Akihiko cracked his knuckles. “Get out of my way.”

He didn’t expect them to listen, and he was grateful they didn’t. It felt good to take all of his nervous energy and *throw it* somewhere. He attacked the closest person he could reach, ducked under a sloppy attempt of a jab, grabbed another by his wrist and threw the man into a few of his friends.

Another wave of pawns came in to fill the gap, but none of them were all that difficult to take down. He hadn’t been in a fight like this in years, but he knew how to read peoples’ movements well enough to know what he was doing. He was pretty sure that his adrenaline would take care of his stamina if it started to get low enough to raise concerns.

He was struck in the jaw by one of the men, but Akihiko countered too quickly for him to enjoy the moment. His fist buried itself into his stomach and the guy fell to his knees, crossing his arms over his injury. He was definitely working up a sweat, but the more he started to look around, the more he worried he was losing time.

A few bigger opponents stepped out of the shadows, one he thought he recognized from his stabbing over a year ago. He couldn’t make out what the man was looking at behind his dark glasses, but if he were to guess, things were about to get a little more complicated.

“What in fuck’s sake is with all this racket?”

The gang of injured men went silent or still or both. The three “muscle” men stepped aside to reveal another hallway, likely his next destination, but a short and stubby man in an ugly purple leather suit glared at everyone in the room.

“Someone tell me what the fuck is going on!”

The man's eyes landed on him, and Akihiko didn't need an introduction to know who this man was. He gave Akihiko a quick once over, then his eyes fell back to the men on the floor. "I guess you live up to your reputation, eh, Sanada?"

After over a year of wondering who the hell he was, Akihiko could finally put a face with the name *Juyna Kaneshiro.* But he sure as hell wasn't about to shake hands with the man who had kidnapped his *daughter* . "Where's the girl?"

Kaneshiro seemed genuinely surprised by his question, but a wave of the hand and a sigh reminded him this man was a mob *boss* and he should be prepared for the worst. "She came to me."

Akihiko wouldn't believe that, not even if his life depended on it. "Where is she?"

The man snarled at him. "You get so pissed off when I take the girls by force, then you get pissed when they show up on my front doorstep?" He had the audacity to click his tongue at him. "She'll be working for me until I don't need her anymore."

An image of Kamoshida's grin came into his mind. The next second, he lunged for Kaneshiro.

That epically backfired in his face.

A loud *pop* reached his ears *after* he felt the searing pain in his leg. He landed on his chest, both arms stretched towards where he had been shot on the side of his knee. He heard a few of the men snickering around him, thinking that he was down for the count, but they had another thing coming if they thought he was going to *give up* .

"Sanada!"

His ears were ringing. There was blood seeping through his fingers. He was in a tremendous amount of pain. He felt someone's hands on his shoulders, then he recognized Kaneshiro's voice.

"The fuck is this? You let these fucking kids follow you here?!"

Kids. Sakamoto and Amamiya? But…he told them to wait outside.

Kids . He remembered the laugh that came from Sae's mouth as a toddler when he threw her into the air. Every time he got tired and wanted to put her down, she would kiss him on the cheek, and it was all he needed to find the strength to keep going.

Kids. He remembered a young Makoto grabbing his hand after a long day at work, pulling him down to the couch next to her, then crawling onto his lap so they could watch her Buchimaru show together. She would tilt her head back during a commercial break, a smile so wide he wondered how she could maintain it, and she would tell him she loved him.

"I'll promise to always be your little girl."

Makoto's words echoed in his mind until the pain in his leg became more of a weak throbbing. He pushed himself off the ground, favoring his left leg, then forced himself to look into the eyes of the man who wanted to take everything away from him.

"Let her go. Now."

One of the men off to his side made a move towards him, but Kaneshiro held up a hand. A few seconds later, he took a seat in a nearby booth and snapped his fingers.

"You have one hell of a spirit, Sanada. Wish my men could be half as strong as you."

Akihiko lost his balance, but an arm wrapped around his back. "You alright, man?" He was still pissed that neither Sakamoto nor Amamiya had listened to him, but he greatly appreciated the support right now.

But Kaneshiro still had his undivided attention. "You're so fucking annoying, you know that, Sanada? I finally make a new home and you come and find me anyway."

His vision darkened for a moment, but then he saw Kaneshiro call over one of his men, grab a suitcase from under the table, and snap it open with a flick of his wrist. "Give this to our client and tell him I'm

sorry for the trouble. The girl isn't for sale now."

He was suddenly very thankful for Ryuji's support or he would have fallen to the ground hearing Kaneshiro's words. Had they done something to Makoto? Was that the only reason they were going to let her go, because she was *damaged goods?* The man sauntered away, money held tightly in his left hand, then the click of the suitcase pulled his attention back to Kaneshiro.

"Give her back. *Now!"*

An unsettling smirk came to the boss's face. Then he nodded his head as another man came into his blurring sight.

Akihiko pushed himself off of Ryuji when he realized Makoto was with this new arrival. He couldn't tell if she was crying because she was scared, the man's grip on the back of her hair was too painful, or both. The man holding her chuckled at him and leaned in to whisper something into her ear. Makoto made eye contact with him and once again, the burning rage set his soul on fire.

Try as he might, the moment he put weight on his injured leg, he stumbled and fell to the ground, but caught himself before his head smacked into the floor again. "Let her go!"

His voice was weak. He sounded pathetic. Desperate. *Terrified* . The pain in his knee sent a jolt up his spine when he tried to move again and both of his hands grabbed at the shitty style of carpeting beneath his fingers. He fought back his tears, not willing to let these men know they had gotten to him, but he felt helpless. What else could he do besides give in to any and every demand this man made to him?

"Oh for fuck's sake, I heard you the first time."

A much softer pair of hands wrapped around him and pulled him back into a seated position. Makoto sat next to him, seemingly unhurt, but frightened. "Are you okay?"

Ryuji came to his other side and together, both of them helped him to rise to his feet. The arm he had draped over Makoto's shoulder

pulled her into him as tightly as he could, dropping his head to hers and offering one last glare to the man still in his sights.

“See, I’m a nice guy, right?” Another unnerving smirk stretched across Kaneshiro’s face. He felt Makoto stiffen next to him when he shook the phone in his hand. “You, on the other hand, just cost me a lot of money.”

When he realized Kaneshiro’s eyes were on Makoto, Akihiko shifted himself so he could block her as best he could. But Kaneshiro glared at him. “I promised her to one of my top-paying customers. He loves pretty little things like her.”

Akihiko found the strength to push off both Ryuji and Makoto and made another move at the man in front of him. Thanks to his terribly reduced agility, the man with the glasses stood in front of where Kaneshiro sat and pointed his gun at his chest.

“Make another move, Sanada, and there will be four dead bodies in this building.”

He would be willing to chance it had it just been his own life at risk, but three innocent teenagers stood behind him. However, it was Kaneshiro’s voice that broke through the tension.

“The fuck is wrong with you? I’m trying to have a conversation with the guy and you wave your fucking gun around like you own the place.” The man never once turned around or stepped aside, the gun still aimed for a kill shot.

Kaneshiro moved around in the booth so he could look at him. “I don’t like dead people. I like the living ones. The ones who make me money.” Kaneshiro pointed over his shoulder with a grin. “Girls like her make me *millions* .”

Despite the gun being pointed at him, Akihiko took one step towards where Kaneshiro was sitting. He felt the barrel press into his chest, but his eyes remained on the man smiling in front of him. “You’re not going to get away with this.”

Kaneshiro took a deep breath and sighed while his hand waved

back and forth in the air. “Me and Miss Student Council President are well enough acquainted with each other that you’re just an annoying little piece of shit.”

Akihiko barely managed to push the barrel away from his chest before the man holding it fired it. The bullet skimmed over the top of his shoulder, but compared to the throbbing in his knee, the pain was nothing. However, when the man kicked at his leg, he wasn’t able to bite back the cry of pain as he hit the ground.

The world was a blur of white light mixed with darkness. He heard another round of shouts, but before he could focus his mind enough on their words, he was pulled up onto his knees. The noises around him faded as the stabbing pain in his leg and the burn on his shoulder completely took over his mind.

Then he felt the gun press into the side of his head and like magic, the world came back into focus.

“The hell man!”

He could have sworn he heard Kaneshiro laughing behind him. “Three million yen. That’s how much you cost me. Now, you’re gonna owe me double that, little girl. You have three weeks. Or I’ll be sure to share all these beautiful pictures of you and your friends to your school. Think about going to the police, and I’ll kill your families.”

Another round of laughter. “An innocent student council president has a secret desire for drugs, alcohol, and sex? I’m sure your school would love that.”

He winced slightly when the gun dug itself deeper into his skin when he tried to move. “Don’t fucking move or I’ll blow your brains out.”

“Please don’t kill him!”

Despite his situation, he was thankful that Amamiya was holding Makoto back. It sucked the life out of him to see the tears on her face, to hear the heart wrenching plea in her voice, but she was safe. She cried out again when there was a click, which he

recognized as the safety of the gun being disabled.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Kaneshiro come stand next to him. “You want him back, too?” He made a slight humming noise, or that was the sound of his brain warning him he was losing too much blood and needed to either get out of there or get shot in the head or he was going to die anyway.

Someone yanked his head back by his hair. Kaneshiro looked down on him with a twisted scowl on his face. “I fucking hate you, you piece of shit. But like I said before, living people make me money.” Kaneshiro released him and his chin smacked into his chest. “You don’t want me to kill the old man, that’s an extra zero. Sixty million. Three weeks. You fail or go speak to his cop friends, I’ll kill him. I’m sure he won’t be hard to find now.”

He cried out in pain when one of the two men behind him stepped on the back of his injured knee. He had no idea how he was able to hear Ryuji’s shout. “How the hell are we gonna come up with that kind of money?!”

The tone in Kaneshiro’s voice made him *sick.* “I have customers who would pay good money to fuck an innocent and pure little thing such as you.” A light cackle came from his lips. “What would your sister say if she saw you in this poor little state? Maybe I’ll go after her next.”

The rage flared back to life and Akihiko threw his elbow into the man holding the gun to his head. The weapon fell to the ground by his legs, then he grabbed the man by the lapels of his blazer and smashed his fist into his face. The sound of his glasses shattering and his nose breaking did wonders for his pride, but the punch had literally drained him of the last reserves of energy.

But somewhere between when the gun had fallen from the man’s hands to the time Akihiko was able to push himself off the ground, Makoto had broken free of Amamiya’s hold and found herself locked in Kaneshiro’s grip. The gun that had fallen to the ground was now in Kaneshiro’s hands and pressed up against his daughter’s head.

“Sixty million yen. Not a bad deal for your lives and yet you *still* try

and cross me!”

Akihiko had no idea how he was able to push himself to his feet, but before he could take one step, a hand grabbed his wrist.

“We will bring you your money. So please, let her go, and we will leave.”

Amamiya.

Ryuji was right behind him and the boy managed to catch him as he fell over. His vision blurring, probably for the last time, he caught another devilish grin on Kaneshiro’s lips before he hovered over Makoto’s ear. He wasn’t in a state to hear what he said, but the next second, he shoved her right into Amamiya’s arms.

The gun swept over the four of them. “Good. Now get the fuck out.”

He felt Makoto wrap an arm around his back and helped Ryuji escort him out of the building. Once he was out of the club, the pain, the fear, the blood loss hit him like a wrecking ball and he fell out of both of their arms to the concrete below him.

“Hang in there, man! You’re gonna be alright!”

Makoto grabbed his hand and sat beside him. “I’m so sorry.” She squeezed harder, her voice quiet with regret. “I’m so sorry…”

“The ambulance is on its way.” Amamiya stood beside where Ryuji had knelt next to him. “We need to prop his leg up so he doesn’t lose any more blood.”

Makoto remained where she was, and in between his bouts of fading vision, he heard her tell him with a hushed voice, “You promised you would keep fighting.” She lifted his hand to her face. “Please.”

He tried to offer her a smile to put her at ease, but when the darkness came to swallow him, he didn’t have the strength to fight it off.

Chapter 36

Chapter 36

Minako knew something was wrong when she came home later than anticipated and Akihiko wasn't there. They had planned to watch a movie that night, one of the first movies she had taken him to before they had started dating, but she had to look four different places to find it. She had sent him a quick message saying she was going to be late and to *not* start making dinner, but he never replied.

It wasn't unusual for him to give her the silent treatment. He wasn't much of a texting person. But the minutes turned into hours, the dinner forgotten about on the table in front of her as she tried to justify why he would be late and why he wouldn't say anything to her about it. That annoying feeling in her stomach began to turn more violently after another hour had passed without a word from him.

Minako even tried to reach Makoto, but she heard nothing from her either. It was getting late. Makoto should have been home by now. Akihiko should have been home by now. But not only were they both *not home* , they weren't *responding* to her. Frantic, she called Akihiko, hoping that he would pick up.

He didn't.

She tried again. Another time. Several more times until she felt her tears fall from her eyes.

Please be okay. Both of you.

She was about to call Makoto when a number she didn't want to see popped up on her screen.

The only time Mitsuru called her was when something happened to Akihiko.

She slid her finger over her screen to answer the call. "Please tell me he's okay."

“I don’t have the full story, but he’s been shot.”

Something she loved and hated about Mitsuru was her ability to be so direct without being told to be. Minako dropped the phone, her opposite hand flying to her mouth. Akihiko had been a lot of things: stabbed, beat up, bitten by some crazed teenager he tried to subdue, but he was never shot. In her desperation to know more details, Minako dropped to her knees and grabbed her phone.

“Is he okay? Is it bad? Please tell me he’s okay.”

Mitsuru sighed over the line. “All I know is that he is currently undergoing surgery to remove the bullet. I’m afraid I don’t know the severity of his injury or where he was shot.”

She *did,* however, tell Minako what hospital he was at. She was in so much of a rush to get out of the apartment that she grabbed the first pair of shoes she could find and threw them on only when she was stuck inside the elevator. She didn’t even care that they weren’t her own. She was more focused on the pain from her heart pounding against her ribcage than to care about the friction on her skin from shoes too small for her feet.

She saw the friendly elderly man she liked to talk to in the mornings, but she didn’t even wave at him as she ran out of the complex.

Get to the station. Get to the station. He’s okay. He’s going to be okay. Get to the station.

The hospital was a short walk, or in her case, *sprint* from Yoyogi Station. She told herself she needed to compose herself before she made a scene storming in through the front doors, so she stood outside for a second and tried to do just that. She wiped at her eyes several times while she focused on breathing normally. No matter how many tears she wiped away, there were more to take their place. She eventually gave up and walked into the hospital as calmly as she could.

Minako stood in front of the check-in station and the nurse looked up at her. “I-I’m looking for…for an A-Akihiko Sanada.”

The lady slowly rose to her feet and walked over to a nearby filing station. She pushed files out of her way before she pulled one out and opened it up. Minako held her breath and held her hands tightly in front of her.

“He got out of surgery a little bit ago.” The nurse looked up at her over the file. “He’s stable for now, but the doctors are keeping a close eye on him.”

Minako almost collapsed to the ground. For almost half an hour, she worried that she would never see him again, he would never tell her he loved her again, she would never tell him she loved him again. To finally find out that he seemed well brought a fresh wave of tears to her eyes and she had to place both hands on the counter in front of her before her knees gave out.

“Can I see him?”

The nurse eyed her curiously, but the lady was kind enough not to question her. “He’s on the second floor, 214.”

She muttered a thank you and took off to the staircase. She knew she wasn’t in half the shape she had been when she was younger, but a flight of stairs took the wind out of her. She blamed it on her nerves, her anxiety, the bone crushing *fear* that she had lost him for good.

However, her heart did another flip in her chest when she caught sight of three people sitting on the bench outside of his room.

“Makoto?”

Her daughter was okay. She had tears streaming down her face, but she was okay. The two boys that sat with her also seemed okay. But, in the presence of unfamiliar faces, Minako couldn’t throw her arms around her daughter like she *needed* to. She settled for a quiet, “Are you okay?”

The dark-haired boy stood up when Makoto did, the arm he had draped over her daughter’s shoulders fell to his side. The blond chose to remain in his seat with his scowl growing on his face.

Makoto took a few steps towards her and Minako had to put her hands behind her back to keep herself from reaching out to her.

“I-I’m okay.”

That was when she met the eyes of the boy standing behind her daughter. She was immediately met with a ringing migraine, both of her hands coming to the sides of her head to help fight it off. She felt Makoto grab her arms, but she couldn’t make out her words. Then, as quickly as the pain had come, it was gone.

It took her a few minutes to catch her breath. The blond boy stood and offered her his seat, to which Makoto helped her sit down in it. “You alright?” The young man who gave her his spot studied her with concern on his face. “You kinda look sick.”

Another hand came to rest on her forehead. “No. No I’m okay. It’s gone now.”

She was not one to have migraines like this, but again, she told herself that she had been through a hell of an evening. She dropped her hand and found her daughter’s eyes. “Is he okay?”

Makoto bit her lower lip to keep it from trembling. It was extremely difficult not to pull her into her arms. “He…he…”

“He’s okay.” The dark-haired boy approached her, but she noticed he didn’t meet her eyes. “He just got moved here a little while ago, so the doctor told us to stay out.”

“Effin’ bastard.”

Knowing that Akihiko was in stable condition, she was in a clearer state of mind to figure out who these two boys were. The blond had to be Akihiko’s friend, Ryuji Sakamoto. The dark-haired boy fit the description that Makoto had given her of the transfer student, Amamiya.

However, she knew she couldn’t come right out and tell them that. “I’m afraid I don’t know either of you.” She extended her hand to the dark-haired boy first, meeting his eyes for the first time since that strange sensation a moment ago. Had he felt it, too? “Minako

Arisato."

She had been correct in her assumptions as both boys introduced themselves to her. While a part of her was touched that Akihiko had made a positive impact on two high school kids, she also wanted to know why they were there.

"I'm assuming you all know what happened, then?"

Makoto turned away from her, another round of tears coming to her eyes. Sakamoto, however, stomped his foot into the ground. "Effin' bastards shot at him and then they-,"

"Ryuji. Enough."

"No, it's okay." Minako's head did a full one-eighty across the three teens in front of her until she returned to her daughter. Makoto wiped at her eyes, then turned her back on her. "This is my fault."

Minako was quick to come to her feet. "What happened?"

Did Makoto get into some kind of trouble and Akihiko just happened to be there? She didn't seem to be hurt, but whether she was hiding it well or masking it behind her concern for her father, she couldn't tell. But when Makoto's hands covered her face, Minako felt something clamp around her heart.

"It's my fault."

The last time she had seen Makoto this broken up had been when Akihiko left on Christmas Eve. She watched as her daughter started to sob, her shoulders shaking and her hands muffling her cries. It tore her heart not being able to do anything, but eventually it became too much for her and she walked in front of Makoto and put her hands on her shoulders.

"Makoto, it's okay. He's going to be okay. And more than anything, he knows *you're* okay."

Then she wrapped her arms around her shoulders. She felt Makoto stiffen in her arms, but she didn't try and pull away. She dropped her head so she could whisper, "It's okay. I promise," and she tightened

her hold on her.

Minako completely forgot about the two boys standing a few meters away until Amamiya made a move for a bag by the seats. He said something to Sakamoto before he walked up to her. “I’m sorry I couldn’t do anything to help.” He bowed deeply to her, something that caught her off guard. When he lifted himself up, he pushed his glasses back up on his face and rolled his shoulders. “Despite the circumstances, it was nice to meet you, Arisato-san.”

Amamiya took a step past her, then he stopped and turned back around. His attention, however, was directed towards her daughter. “Are you going to be okay getting home, Niijima-senpai?”

Makoto leaned back in her arms, ran a hand over her face, then nodded to him. “Thank you.”

Minako caught the look the boy gave her before he turned around and walked down the hall. She found it odd that he would be the only one to leave. Did she freak him out? It was pretty late now, so she assumed he was tired and needed to head home.

Sakamoto kicked at the floor again, mumbling a string of curses under his breath, then he ran both of his hands through his hair. A few seconds later, he was calm again. Both of his hands went into his pockets and he kept his voice low.

“Sorry, Senpai. But I know he’ll be alright. That guy’s a tough son of a bitch.”

The boy took one last look into Akihiko’s room, then sighed and walked down the hall. Minako felt bad for not being able to say anything to the poor kid, but she really didn’t know enough about him to know what to say. It looked like he really cared about Akihiko, which touched her heart in more ways than one, but at the same time, she was happy to finally be alone with her daughter.

Minako held Makoto by her shoulders and gently shook her. “I really want you to tell me what happened. Please.”

Makoto shook her head violently and pulled herself out of her hold.

“No!”

She didn’t want to push her. She had to have been in the area when her father had been shot. She couldn’t imagine how terrifying that had to have been to witness, especially if Makoto thought he was going to die. She grabbed her daughter’s hands and tugged on them, but Makoto kept shaking her head.

“Makoto, no matter what, I know this wasn’t your fault.” She did have a tendency to over exaggerate her role in bad situations. “Honey. Please.”

Makoto started sobbing again and fell into the closest seat. “I-I t-thought he was going to…going to die!”

Minako was at her side in a second, both of her arms draping around her as Makoto threw her head into her chest. “I can’t imagine how frightening that was.” She kissed the top of her head. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there for either of you.”

“He shouldn’t have come for me.”

She couldn’t help her quiet laughter. “Makoto, no matter where you would have been, or what kind of trouble you were in, your dad would have stopped doing *anything* to help you. He loves you.”

“He’s going to hate me now.”

“Makoto,” she said with a slight push of her shoulder. She had to move her hand under her daughter’s chin to force her to look at her. “There is nothing in the world that could make your father hate you. *Ever* .”

Makoto wiped her eyes, then turned her head to stare at the floor. “I have to come up with a lot of money or I’m going to have to go back and work it off.”

Minako’s eyes widened. “How much money? And work it off? How?”

“I went to go talk to a bad guy because I wanted him to stop bothering students at school.” Another hand rubbed at her eyes. “I was stupid. Had Dad and the other two not shown up to get me, I

would have been shipped off with some creepy guy to be his…his… *girl* …"

Minako sat there, her arms losing their strength to keep themselves around Makoto's shoulders. She tried not to think of what her daughter had been trying to say, but she couldn't stop the images, nor the sharp turn of her stomach that made her sick.

But she couldn't come out and tell Makoto that she had been extremely foolish to take on such a daring task with her in her current state of mind. Hadn't this been the exact same reason she got into trouble with her teacher? It was extremely hard to find her voice. "No matter how much this man is asking for, your dad is not going to let you go back. *I* won't let you go back."

"He has pictures of me and those two, Mom."

Makoto's voice had been far too quiet for her liking. Her head fell to her chest and she twisted her hands together on her lap. Another wave of nausea hit her. "What kind of pictures, Makoto?"

She didn't get a response, but at this point, she didn't want one. Makoto's silence had told her enough. So not only was her husband shot and in the hospital for who knows how long, her *daughter* had been blackmailed with prostitution? She wanted to slap Makoto across the face, but what good would that do now? Makoto was clearly disturbed and shaken up, terrified that her father may be *dying* , and fully aware of the reality she had found herself in.

It didn't stop some of her disdain from creeping out into her tone. "How much money did this man ask for?"

She knew Makoto could sense how upset she was when she turned away from her completely. "A lot."

Minako grabbed her opposite shoulder and forced her to turn back around. "How much, Makoto?"

"…Sixty million."

Sixty million . There was no way. If they could sell every last thing they had and added that to what they had in their name, they *might*

be able to make it work. But she knew if they did, they wouldn't last much longer.

Her next thought was to ask Mitsuru, but Minako always harped on Akihiko for going to her for money when he had been in a tight spot. He had told her he paid her back, but Mitsuru wasn't a bunch of numbers. She was a person. And she felt that Akihiko forgot that more times than not.

"When does he want it?"

If it had to be transferred overnight, there was no way. Sixty million was way too much for Mitsuru to have to scramble to get without needing to divert attention or call in favors. She would need some time, if she even agreed to help.

"He said three weeks."

Minako could feel the walls crumble around her. Three weeks was a decent amount of time, but not for a situation as grave as this. Even if Mitsuru offered to front half of that, they would be bankrupt by the end of the month. Their financial burdens in the past had almost split them apart, and while they had grown up quite a bit since, it wasn't another stress she wanted in their marriage.

She was pulled from her thoughts when Makoto threw herself to her feet. "This was my fault. I'll find a way to get the money, okay?"

Had this been any other situation, Minako would have fallen out of her seat laughing too hard. How the hell was Makoto going to get sixty million yen in three…

Minako grabbed her arm before she took off. "Don't you even think about it." Her hand tightened when Makoto tried to shake her off. "Your father went out looking for you because he loves you. If you run back to that man now, all you're going to do is kill your dad. Is that what you want, Makoto?"

"But-,"

"Stop!" She came to her feet and glared at Makoto. "We will find a way to work this out. For now, you will stay out of trouble. You will

only be allowed to go to and from school unless I'm accompanying you. So help me god, Makoto, if you wander off *once,* I will lock you in your room!"

She hated to have to be so cold to her after everything she had been through, but she worried if she didn't lay down the law now, Makoto would run off the first chance she could. "Okay."

Her hand fell to her side, but she was ready to reach back out and stop Makoto if she bolted. "I know you feel like you're to blame, so if you want to apologize, stay out of trouble. Please."

Makoto's eyes fell back to the floor after a quick nod. She needed to get her home. Makoto had school the next day. She doubted Akihiko would wake up for at least another day, hopefully, so she placed one arm around her daughter's shoulders and took one step towards his room.

It was never easy seeing Akihiko lying in a hospital bed, but he was always *awake* when she managed to swing by. He looked peaceful at least, the annoying *beep* of the heart monitor bringing her an immense amount of comfort. She watched his chest rise and fall a few times before she tightened her hold on Makoto.

"I'll drop by to see him after I take you to school tomorrow. I'll keep you posted on his condition, okay?"

She felt Makoto nod and she took one last glance at her husband, then shook her head before the tears could fall from her eyes.

Walking away from him was the hardest thing she had to do that night.

Chapter 37

Chapter 37

“Take me with you.”

Ren almost fell down the stairs. He turned over his shoulder to find a teary-eyed Niijima-senpai holding her hands together in front of her. Something tugged his heartstrings. It hurt looking at her like this. Try as she might, he could still see her shoulders shaking, her lips trembling, her breath coming in short gasps for air. He knew she felt solely responsible for what happened in Kaneshiro’s club, and Ren would like to think she really was, but she needed help.

He sure as hell wasn’t about to walk away from her now.

“Where do you want to go?”

She didn’t hesitate. “To take Kaneshiro’s heart.”

Ren made a grab for the railing. “W-What?”

Makoto shook her head. “Please. There’s no way we can meet those demands. Sanada is still in the hospital. I need to do something *now* .”

Morgana poked his back with his head. “I don’t know how I feel about this.”

Ren didn’t know how he felt either. She had been through so much in the past few months and he didn’t want to put her through anymore. He would talk to the others and make plans to investigate Kaneshiro’s palace, now that they had a name. The rest would hopefully fall into place.

But regardless of his own thoughts, he found it *very* difficult to look away from her “puppy-dog” eyes. He sighed, then reached out for her arm. “Let’s talk about this first.”

“We’re running out of time! I need to do something!”

Ren tried to ignore her inability to yell at him when her words were meant to be shouted. He watched her run her other arm over her eyes. “Please, Amamiya.”

She didn’t resist him any further as he guided her back past the third floor and up to the rooftop. Makoto seemed surprised that he took her up there rather than to the student council room, but then she turned to him with a curious look.

“This is where you’ve been hiding after school.”

He cracked a smile since she was showing some other emotion besides heartbreaking grief. He shrugged his shoulders. “You caught me.”

She lowered her head and clasped her hands together again. “I want to go with you guys.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea,” he said truthfully, trying to ignore the way his heart hammered in his chest. “You’ve been through enough for a few weeks. We will handle this, okay?”

She shook her head. “I won’t just sit around and do nothing.”

Ren took another approach. “How is Sanada-san doing?”

Makoto’s hands separated and each one of them closed into fists by her sides. “He’s still unconscious, last I heard.” But then she took him by surprise. “I want to go with you!”

He sighed and pulled out one of the folding chairs Ryuji liked to sit in all the time. “Can I ask you why?” He held up a hand so he could continue his thought. “I know you feel bad about what happened. So why don’t you tell me why you went through all of this to begin with?”

He motioned a hand for her to sit next to him, but she refused. In fact, she seemed to grow more and more aggravated the longer she stood. “The longer we sit here and *talk* , the more time we lose to help!”

He groaned and dropped his head, then he pushed himself up to his feet. “I wasn’t planning on meeting with the others today. Ryuji is still a wreck. That guy meant a lot to him, you know.”

Makoto flinched hearing his words. “Y-Yes…I know…”

“What I’m trying to say is that I want to give him, and you, time to calm down.” He put a tentative hand on her shoulder. “He means a lot to you, too.”

She was quiet, but Ren was glad she wasn’t trying to act out in denial. He was starting to realize that the more dangerous the situation she found herself in, the more irrational her thoughts and the more she dug herself deeper into trouble.

“So tell me why you felt obligated to do all of this.”

Ren led her back to his previous seat and relaxed when she sat down. He chose to lean on the edge of the table, dropping his bag to the space beside him. Makoto continued to stare out into the spot by his feet, her face remaining expressionless. He leaned towards her and spoke quietly.

“Makoto.”

Her eyes closed as she took a slow inhale. Ren braced himself. “I just wanted to help.”

Ren remained silent and waited for her to speak again. He felt Morgana stir beside him until he popped himself out of his bag. He too kept quiet.

“I just wanted to talk to him, and to know where he was so my…s-so Sanada could go arrest him.” Her head dropped and he couldn’t see her face. “It was all I could think of so he wouldn’t lose his job and you wouldn’t go to jail.”

Hearing this, Ren dropped to his knees in front of her. “Is that what the principal threatened you with?”

When she tried to turn her face away, one of his hands reached up to stop her. That few seconds of eye contact burned him straight into

his soul. That desire to protect her, to keep her safe, to make her *happy* stirred within him more violently than it had with Kamoshida.

He was slightly hurt that she shook his hand off. “I’m tired of relying on people to help me.” Her eyes narrowed, but she kept her gaze away from him. “I’m an adult now. I’m going to college soon. And I’ve always had someone babying me.” Her hands went to her lap and she held them together tightly. Ren was afraid she would break both of them. “I can’t do anything on my own. I never will.”

One of his knees scooted closer to her. “Makoto, it’s okay to rely on other people. No one can make it through life alone.” Not that he was going to tell her that sometimes some people weren’t good to rely on at all... “I wish you would have told me this earlier. We could have worked something out.”

Her glare turned to him, that dark crimson color knocking the breath out of him. “And what would you have offered to do? It was either turn yourself in or someone I care about would take a bigger fall. There was no middle ground. I tried to find one and look at what that did for me!”

Ren actually took a step back until the back of his neck hit the end of the table. She was hurting, blaming herself for a situation she couldn’t control. It hurt him more than he thought it would. “You did all of this to keep the principal from sniffing me out?”

Makoto took a deep breath and looked away again. “I wanted to find out if you were even worth defending. You were kind enough during the issue with Kamoshida, but going after Madarame was different. I wouldn’t let someone who only cared about the praise of humiliating bad guys go untouched when someone who had dedicated his life to protecting people was going to lose everything.”

Another question popped into his mind. “How would Sanada have lost his job? Because the principal could get him fired?” He regained his lost ground and stepped closer to her. “I doubt that a guy with his credentials would be fired based off whatever the principal-,”

“You don’t understand.”

He could have easily talked over her, but the look of pain on her face is what stopped him. “Okay. Make me understand.”

Ren thought he saw the tears come back to her eyes. “He’s on his last warning. No matter who were to make a complaint against him, he could lose his job. And until the investigation about his involvement with Kamoshida is cleared, he can’t get into any more trouble.”

“Wait,” he started once her words registered in his brain. “He’s under investigation? For trying to kill him?”

Makoto lightly shook her head. “That was one part of it. I heard that Kamoshida accused him of planting those cards at school, or knowing who did. He also told me that he had listened to Kamoshida’s confession, so his bosses don’t think it was genuine.”

He felt something cold land in his stomach. “Is Kamoshida going to get out?” He glanced over at Morgana. “Would a change of heart wear off?”

Makoto looked up at him in confusion, but he waited for Morgana to answer him. “I doubt it. Once his desires are gone, they can’t just come back.”

“Are you talking to your cat?”

He did his best to ignore her question. “Why does Sanada care about you this much that he’s willing to put his job on the line for you?”

When he noticed her eyes widening, he feared he wasn’t going to get an honest answer, or one at all. She flattened her hands against her skirt, unable to keep eye contact for long. In her silence, Ren shook his head and came to his feet, deciding it wasn’t important. For now.

“It doesn’t matter.” He grabbed his bag and she finally looked back up at him. “He’s a good guy. Ryuji hates adults and would defend him in a heartbeat. That alone says enough about his character in my opinion.” There were still so many questions he had, but he

figured that they could wait until they tackled the bigger issue of Kaneshiro. He offered Makoto his hand, but she stared at it for far too long and he grew slightly uncomfortable.

“We’re going to help you. We’re going to help him. But for today,” he paused when her eyes met his. “Get some rest. Go check up on him. I’ll talk to my friends and we’ll get started tomorrow, okay?”

“I want to go with you.”

He sighed and his hand fell to his side. “Makoto, it’s dangerous. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

Before he could even *blink* , she threw a punch into his stomach and he doubled over in pain. He heard Morgana laugh from his spot on the table.

“I can take care of myself.”

He groaned from where he was still hunched over, but Morgana hopped off the table to sit down in front of him. “I think we should take her. She seems very determined, which could prove useful in the Metaverse.”

“I trained under Sanada. I also mastered aikido.”

It was hard to find his breath and then pull himself back up to his feet. “What is wrong with you?”

She faltered for half a second, but then she shook her head and stepped into him, her neck craning to get into his face. “I’m going with you.”

Despite how angry he was at her for striking him, he was also tempted to close the remaining distance and kiss her. He instead took a step back so he didn’t actually do it. “Fine.” She was super cute when she was angry. “But you’ll be watching from the sides. I don’t want you to fight.”

She seemed at ease with his statement. “Thank you.”

And now Ren had the perfect chance to ask. “Then, can I have your

number?" He dug his phone from his pocket and tried to breathe normally. "I'll need to get in contact with you tomorrow."

They both exchanged information and he felt like he was just promised a date with her. Maybe he would ask once Kaneshiro had been dealt with. If she didn't punch him again. He tried to contain his excitement, still unsure of how she was coping with everything, to make sure he didn't rub her the wrong way.

She pocketed her own device, but then she stood still as her eyes scanned the floor in front of her. She said nothing and made no move to leave, so Ren offered her his hand one more time. "I can walk you back to the station if you'd like."

"What are you going to tell Takamaki, or Sakamoto?" Her voice was hushed and one of her arms reached over her body to rest on her shoulder. "They hate me."

He found himself chuckling. "They don't hate you, Makoto." He moved his hand more to be in her line of sight. "And I know they are both willing to help you."

"How do you know that?"

"Because," he said with another soft laugh. "They don't know how much you suffered at the hands of Kamoshida. They don't know how much trouble you went through to get him to stop. But they *do* know you're in trouble right now and we always help those who need it. No matter what."

He was about to let his hand drop for a second time when she reached out slowly, but then she retracted her hand. "I don't want to bother them. Or you."

This time, he grabbed her hand and gave it a light tug. "Stop worrying so much. Everything is going to be okay." He lowered himself until his eyes were even with hers. "Sanada is going to be okay. You're going to be okay. Trust me."

A familiar warmth washed over him when her face turned a bright shade of pink and she looked away from him, her hand still locked in

his. “After everything I’ve done to you…”

A smile broke out over his face. “I’ll forgive you if you let me help you.”

That warmth spread throughout his bloodstream when she offered him a small smile. “You’re very kind, Amamiya.”

“Call me Ren. Please.”

Her face darkened and his smile widened. “T-Thank you…um, R-Ren.”

He felt brave enough to toss an arm over her shoulders as she buried her face into her hands. “Let me get you home.”

But then he stopped. Did she want to go home or did she want to go check up on her friend at the hospital? He didn’t want to kill the mood by bringing Sanada’s injuries back up, but he couldn’t stop himself.

“Are you going to the hospital?”

She hesitated for a few seconds, then she shook her head. “I don’t want to.”

And just like that, he killed the mood. “Why not?”

“Because I’m afraid.”

He used his arm to pull her into his chest. She didn’t fight him, to his surprise, and his hand rubbed over her arm. “I can go with you, if that helps.”

He heard her sniff behind her hands and his heart began to hurt again. “I don’t know what to say to him if he’s awake.”

“I’m sure he will be happy to know you’re okay,” he replied.

Her hands fell to her sides. “What if he hates me?”

Ren didn’t know the man all that well, but he could only imagine how

much compassion he had if he could deal with a kid like Ryuji. Whatever Makoto's relationship had been with the older man, Ren would be willing to bet that Sanada would simply be happy knowing she was safe. "I doubt he hates you. He wouldn't have come to help you if he thought that."

She said nothing more to him as he helped her off the rooftop and down the stairs to the first floor. She only stopped him when they were standing right outside the station.

"Will you go with me?"

Ren offered her a nod and a smile before he draped his arm back over her shoulder. They were silent the entire way to the hospital, but he could feel Makoto fidgeting beneath his arm. Her hands were turning over each other in front of her. She kept shifting her weight around on her feet. He never spoke up, hoping to relax her with his presence rather than with words he would likely say wrong.

But Makoto froze all together when they reached the hospital. "I-I-I can't…"

He made a grab for her hand when he noticed her feet turning towards the station. "We came all this way, Makoto. You can do this."

He wanted so desperately to wipe her tears from her face, but that would have earned him a slap to the face, or worse, another punch to his stomach. She took his hand when he held it out to her, but he had to tug her along for most of the walk inside and down the second floor hallway.

The lady from yesterday was there again and Ren reached up to run his fingers through his hair. Would he have another headache again? Just who was this woman?

Upon seeing Makoto at his side, the woman smiled brightly at them. "Here to introduce your boyfriend?"

Ren and Makoto both jumped back, her hand immediately falling from his. The woman laughed at their reaction as both of them

turned to face the opposite walls. Would he like to be her boyfriend? Of course. But, there were still a lot of things he wanted to know about her, and her to know about him. One day. Hopefully.

The woman's laughter died out when she stood from her seat and approached them. "He's still unconscious, but the doctors all say he's getting better."

He heard rather than saw Makoto sigh in relief. "T-That's good."

There was something about the way the woman looked at Makoto that made him very curious to know who she really was. And why she was there visiting Sanada on a second day.

Was this woman her mother? She did have the similar crimson-tinted eyes, and that was something he didn't see every day. She had a different last name than Makoto, had never referred to her as her daughter, and Makoto had never called her 'Mom'. Was she Sanada's girlfriend, maybe? Or…worse yet…was *Makoto* his girlfriend?!

He shook his head and tossed the thought aside before he let it settle in his heart. There was some sort of relationship between the three of them, but what that was, he wasn't sure, and he was too terrified to ask. The lady (Arisato, right?) could have been Sanada's wife, but again, they didn't share a last name. So maybe a girlfriend? But then where did Makoto fit in the picture? If he had to guess, he was standing with Makoto's mother, but Makoto had her father's last name. So maybe Sanada was a stepdad of sorts? Maybe they all lived together? He had no idea…

He kept his mouth shut, reminded himself it was none of his business, and watched as the woman he pegged to be Makoto's mother pushed her into Sanada's room. When Makoto was out of sight, Arisato turned to him again.

"Thank you for bringing her here."

Was he supposed to say 'you're welcome' or 'not a problem' or how the hell did someone speak to a woman who may or may not have been their crushes' *mother?* "Oh, y-you're welcome." He noticed the

growing smile on her face and needed a change in conversation. “How is he?”

He felt stupid asking a question he already knew the answer to. Great. Making a fool in front of her on day one. If she thought him an idiot or weird, she didn’t show it.

“He’ll likely be in the hospital for the rest of the week, then in therapy for a month at least, according to the doctor.” A small smile came to her face. “And assuming he *listens* and doesn’t do anything stupid.” A sad look came to her eyes a moment later. “I want to thank you for being there for him.”

Ren was going to tell her it wasn’t a big deal when he noticed that she wasn’t wearing a wedding ring. He chastised himself for even looking, but his mind was doing its own thing right now. However, he knew better than to comment on it. He chose to nod his head instead of giving her a verbal answer.

“Have we ever met before?”

Her question struck him as odd and he was pretty sure his reaction told her as much. She waved her hand in front of her dismissively before she took a seat. “I feel like I’ve met you before. I know it’s weird, but that headache I got when I saw you yesterday was not a coincidence.”

Ren wanted to ask Morgana his opinion, since he seemed pretty good at depicting “special” people from normal ones. But coming out and speaking to his cat in front of someone who struck him as extremely sharp was a definite no-no.

“I would like to think I would have remembered someone like you had I met you before.”

She eyed him curiously before her gaze fell to the flooring beneath her. “I’m sorry for asking.”

“No,” he replied, his mind working in overdrive to say something better. “I felt it too. That headache. But I would have no idea where we would have met, or what this all means.”

She leaned her back against the wall. She looked as if she was spinning a thousand different questions through her mind, something he caught Makoto doing frequently too, but she never voiced any of them. It made him slightly uncomfortable, unable to say anything and feeling out of place.

However, she sighed heavily and threw herself to her feet. “Regardless, I appreciate you helping them both.” Her head turned towards the room Makoto had walked into a few minutes ago. “I can take her back home. So you don’t have to stay if you don’t want to.”

A part of him wanted to wait for Makoto, make sure she was okay (and to have a chance to say goodbye), but he also didn’t want to cut into her time. Arisato looked like she was going to apologize, but he offered her a smile to stop her.

“It’s okay. I need to get home.” He then bowed to her. “I’m glad to know he’s doing better.”

Arisato gave him a smile of her own. “You’re a very nice kid, you know that?”

He wanted her to tell his parents that. “Thank you.”

When he was far enough outside the range of the hospital and any other crowds of people, he prodded Morgana to come out of his bag. “Did you feel anything with her?”

Morgana lowered his head, thinking. “Hmm, not really. Maybe she thinks you’re someone else?”

He doubted that.

Chapter 38

Chapter 38

“Office building! …Um, club! Or…or, um, bar! The ‘eff I don’t know!”

Ren watched with a pang of sadness as Ryuji kept shouting nouns into the phone. He was still extremely upset with what had happened a few days ago, but Ren couldn’t blame him. The only time anyone interrupted him was when Ann realized Ryuji was only shouting profanities and they were in a popular public spot.

A light tug on his sleeve directed his attention to the girl beside him. “Um, what is he doing?”

Ren was still hesitant in taking Makoto to the new palace, but both Ryuji and Morgana told him that it was either she come when he *knew* she was with them or she would pull an Ann and get sucked in and *not* stay out of trouble. “We need to know what form Kaneshiro’s palace is.”

Makoto cocked her head to the side. “Shouldn’t we go find out first?”

Her innocence was adorable, but Morgana hopped up on the closest ledge before he could comment on it. “Every palace leader has out of control desires that will manifest as a physical form. In Kamoshida’s case, his palace was a castle, where he could rule as king and everyone had to do as he said.” The cat scratched his ear. “Tell her that. I forgot she can’t understand me.”

“Is…Is he trying to tell me something?”

Ren couldn’t help the smile on his face. “In simple terms, the palace reflects what the owner sees something as. For example, Kamoshida saw the school as a castle. We need three keywords to enter the Metaverse. A name, a location, and the palace form.”

He mentally slapped himself in the head as Makoto simply stared back at him. “Oh.” He was only just starting to understand what was

going on, so someone who had no idea any of this existed would have a difficult time accepting his words as truth.

“So basically what we need to know now,” Ren began as he leaned back against the ledge Morgana was resting on. “Is what Kaneshiro views some place as.”

Regardless of if she understood him, Makoto’s hand came to rest on her chin. “Kamoshida had a castle? And Madarame had…what?”

“A museum. Where he was the sole artist collecting fame for plagiarized work.”

Another thoughtful look passed over her face. “Kaneshiro loves money. So, maybe a bank?”

That odd pulse of energy went through his body. He would never get used to that. Ryuji, however, jumped in his place and turned to look at them. “Oh shit! Good call, Prez!”

Makoto turned her head at Ryuji’s “compliment” and another smile worked on his lips when he noticed the dusting on her cheeks. “You’re going to be an expert in no time.”

The light pink turned into a darker color and Ren chuckled at how *cute* it was. “I-I’m just thinking out loud.”

Morgana stood on all fours, his tail wagging happily behind him. “It’s going to be nice having a smart person with us for a change!”

Ren palmed his head while he felt Makoto’s eyes land on him. “How can you understand him?”

“Sometimes I wish I didn’t.” He met her eyes. “When a person enters the Metaverse, they can start to understand him. But don’t ask me how that’s possible.”

Makoto shook her head. “I’m having a hard time understanding all of this.”

He put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “I wish I could tell you it becomes easier, but it doesn’t. We just accept it.”

“Okay,” she said with a nod. “What do we do now?”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “Now we have to figure out *what* Kaneshiro sees as a bank.”

“And then we can steal his heart?”

The urgency in her voice and the slight frown on her face made Ren’s heart clench. “Well…no.”

Makoto’s shoulders dropped. “Then when do you steal it?”

He took a step towards her. “Makoto, I promise that we will have all of this taken care of by the end of three weeks. But it still takes time. Palaces are mentally and physically challenging. The quicker we try to rush things, the more it sets us back. We barely had enough time with Kamoshida.”

She rubbed her shoulder with her hand. “I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s okay,” he said with a sigh. “I wish I could walk in there and do it the same day, but I can’t. *We* can’t. But we will keep you out of trouble, alright?”

When he saw her hand grab at the fabric of her shirt around her shoulder, he grew slightly uncomfortable. She looked to be in a great deal of pain, and he worried that maybe she *had* been hurt when she had been taken. He took another step towards her.

“Are you okay?”

“What happens if you fail?”

Her voice had been so quiet that he wouldn’t have caught her question had he not been as close as he was. Another small wave of insecurity hit him. “We won’t.”

Her eyes narrowed, but she kept her gaze to the ground. “What happens if you fail?”

Ren thought it best to not mince words a second time. “Then those pictures are going to get out. I will likely find myself being thrown

back in jail. I don't know what would happen to you or Ryuji."

As he expected, she flinched at his statement, but then he sighed and added, "But we won't let that happen. You just need to believe in us."

To his surprise, she stomped her foot into the ground and balled her fists by her sides. "You don't understand! This is *my* fault! If you fail, then *you* will suffer the most! It's not fair. You shouldn't have to-,"

"Then come with us."

She stopped, her eyes lifting to meet his, and even at the sight of angry tears lining her eyes, he didn't break away. "I don't want you to get hurt, but if you're determined to help, then come with us. Don't waste your time drowning in your regret when you can *do* something."

A look of surprise flashed over her face. She took a step back as her eyes fell to the space next to him. He felt another smile playing on his lips as he put his hands in his pockets to keep himself from reaching out to her.

"I've told you before how grateful I was for you being kind to me on my first day here. I know the situation is different, but you reached out to me when you didn't know me. So after that first day I walked to school and found Kamoshida's castle, I told myself I wouldn't be afraid. I wouldn't let the rumors bother me. I *did* something rather than cower behind my fear of going back to jail or being hurt because people didn't know my situation."

Makoto's eyes grew wide as she listened to him, then her head fell to her chest. "You're right."

Ren braved taking another step. "If you were to run off and start working for him, what would change?"

She jerked at his question. "W-What?"

"Nothing," he answered for her. "How many other people will this man go after? How many times will he bribe his way out of jail time? You would only be feeding his habit, not changing it."

He let her think on his words as he turned back to the group behind him. Ryuji was still shouting random words into the phone while Ann stood by his side and told him to calm down.

When he asked the three of them how things were progressing, Ryuji shot him an angry look. “We ain’t getting nowhere! At this rate, we’re gonna have to walk around all of effin’ Shibuya to find out where the hell this guy…”

Beginning navigation.

Ren thought for a second he was going to be sick when the world before him began to spin and warp into a desolate street straight out of a horror movie. No matter how many times he would enter the Metaverse, he doubted that sensation would ever pass. It took his body a second to recover, but he slowly adjusted to the feeling of his duster on his shoulders, the gloves on his hands, the mask over his eyes.

But the terrified shriek behind him sent his mind reeling and his heart pounding. He turned around, his jacket flaring behind him, to find Makoto on the ground in front of Morgana. The poor girl was shaking, holding her hands over her head, and trying to get as far away from the animal as she could.

“S-S-Stay a-away!”

Ren had to bite back a laugh. Someone who was willing to face a mafia boss head-on and unafraid had been terrified of a cat…thing. It was cute. Strangely. But he walked around a saddened Morgana to kneel in front of Makoto.

“It’s alright. It’s just Morgana. He won’t hurt you.”

He felt slightly sick to his stomach again when her fearful eyes met his, then she pushed herself farther back into the corner where she was sitting. “W-Who are you?”

“We need to get going or Skull is going to start bashing someone’s face in!”

Makoto did a full sweep of the area as Ann came up behind him.

Some sense of understanding came over the older girl and the fear quickly turned into confusion. “T-Takamaki?”

Ann flipped a ponytail over her shoulder. “Yep. We use codenames here, though. It’s pretty cool!”

“W-What happened to your clothes?”

Ren pushed himself up onto his feet and held out a hand. “We can answer all of your questions later. Right now, we need to start investigating.”

He almost kicked Morgana when he jumped next to him. “We need to find where Kaneshiro is hiding right now,” he added, which was followed by another frantic scream from Makoto. Morgana dropped his head. “She’s afraid of me.”

Ann was kind enough to put her hand on the cat’s head, instantly cheering up the odd creature as they both walked down the creepy street. Once again, Ren extended his hand to Makoto. “Come on. Let’s get moving.”

Her hands fell from her head as she scanned the area again. “R-Ren?”

He never answered her, but she eventually shook off her surprise and reached out for his hand. “Stay behind me. There are probably a lot of things that will startle you here, but nothing will hurt you.”

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. When her eyes opened again, the familiar determination burned in them. He smiled, happy to know that she was ready to go, then turned on his heels to follow after the others.

To his surprise, Makoto fared very well with the talking ATM machines, the hovering bank where he bet Kaneshiro was hiding out at, the eeriness of the atmosphere that made *him* more tense than usual. She did *not* fare as well with random noises, such as a small piece of concrete breaking off rundown buildings, Ryuji’s loud shouts if he was farther ahead of them, the ATM people falling down once they walked past them.

And each time she clung to his arm like he was the only thing keeping her grounded. He was grateful no one was focusing on him enough to notice the faint blush that reached his face.

Her hands tightened around his arm when Morgana turned to the group. “Okay, so in order to get inside his palace, we need a customer of his. So…”

All eyes fell to him, so he shook his shoulder to get Makoto’s attention. “We’re going to need your help.”

Knowing that everyone was looking at her, she immediately separated herself from him. He felt cold for half a second before the blush took over her face. “R-Right. What do I need to do?”

She was still very hesitant around Morgana, but she followed behind him to the end of the street. “Hopefully, this will attract his attention.”

A few seconds later, the floating bank stopped in the air and lowered a ramp for them to walk up. Ren found the entire situation bizarre, but then he told himself when did anything in this world *ever* make sense? If things started *making sense* , it would probably be a good reason to *stop* .

It was Makoto and Ryuji who walked up the ramp first, both of them with a similar unwavering aura surrounding them. Hell, maybe if they were lucky, the two of them would barge into this palace and frighten Kaneshiro with a look alone. Ren was walking behind them and he was *still* intimidated. Ann was a short distance in front of him while Yusuke and Morgana stood by his side.

“Makoto seems really eager to *not* sit on the sidelines and watch like you told her to.”

Ren sighed, but chose not to reply to Morgana. He ignored Yusuke’s curious look and followed behind the group in front of him. He was sure that the second Makoto saw a Shadow, or anything that didn’t resemble a human, she would run back around him and grab his arm and he would keep her safe…

But instead, she charged right into the lobby and stood in the middle

and shouted, “We’re here to steal your heart, Kaneshiro!”

Morgana groaned behind him as Ren threw his hands into his pockets before he slapped himself in the head. Ryuji, however, knew better than to yell at a palace leader. “Show your face, you little shit! We’re gonna make you pay!”

Ann at least yanked on the arm Ryuji had shaking in the air. “What are you doing?”

“There’s no need to shout, children.”

Ren cursed under his breath and took several steps to come to stand behind Makoto. He grabbed her arm, but she quickly shook him off and stepped towards the disgusting shadow version of Kaneshiro. Why wasn’t she *afraid* of him?!

“Makoto, stop!”

They didn’t know how dangerous Kaneshiro was in his palace, but he witnessed first-hand how dangerous the man was in his club. He thought Makoto would have learned from what had happened the first time, but he had no choice but to run up to her and grab her around the waist before she threw a punch into Kaneshiro’s face.

Kaneshiro’s shadow found the situation amusing. “So I take it you’re here to discuss the terms of your debt, right, Miss President?”

Ryuji came up beside him. “We ain’t payin’ you *shit* , old man!”

Ren knew he should have given both of them more time to calm down. They were both so angry and hot-headed and *not thinking!* “Enough.”

The purple-skinned shadow gave off another mocking laugh. “I take payments in many forms.” His yellow eyes landed on Makoto and despite her anger, he felt her tense in his grip. “I have many clients who would pay good money for an innocent and uptight piece of work like you.”

He tugged on her arm, but Makoto shook her head. “I won’t do anything for you!”

The anger was back in her tone and Ren began to grow frustrated. She was afraid and upset, but damn it she should know better than to talk back to someone who could have had all four of them killed the other day without batting an eye. Even now, they were a group made up of four teenage persona users, plus a cat…creature, which he highly doubted were strong enough to take on this guy and his men by themselves.

Especially since Kaneshiro seemed to find everything entertaining. “I could make do with your sister, since I’m sure she would love to hear how *stupid* her little sister has been!”

Makoto went still under his arm and *thankfully* kept her mouth shut. But Kaneshiro kept running his. “She’s quite the beauty, isn’t she? I would even keep her for myself. She seems like she could give me *exactly* what I want. The highest honor! …And then I can sell her off when I’m done with her.”

“Stop.” Makoto’s voice was quiet, but whether that meant she was starting to realize what she had gotten into or she was starting to snap, he couldn’t tell. Either way, he pulled on her arm again to get her to move.

“We need to get out of here.” They had done enough for one day. *Far* too much for one day. Coming in and making a scene and pissing off the palace owner had *not* been on the agenda. “Panther, grab Skull. We need to go!”

But several figures appeared and blocked their exit. All of them donned some sort of police gear, and Ren cursed again. Now they were going to have to fight. He wasn’t totally against the idea, but with how many began to form from the ground and continue to circle them, he worried they might have been in over their heads.

“I love the fact you’re so dumb, Miss President,” Kaneshiro laughed. “It makes everything fall right into place! I can finally kill off that fucking hot-shot police kid. I can have your sister in the palm of my hand. All the while, I can suck all this money out of stupid little shits like you and no one can stop me!”

Ren’s heart began to race when several of the police figures turned

into shadows. The rest of his team took a battle-ready stance, hands over their masks, weapons drawn for a fight. He wasn't so gentle when he pulled Makoto behind him and glared at her.

"Stay behind me and for the love of god keep your mouth shut."

"Kill them, but hands off Miss President." The yellow eyes and smug grin made Ren's stomach twist into a knot. "I can't wait to put her to work."

The minute Kaneshiro began laughing, Ren turned his attention to the encroaching shadows. They knew nothing about their weaknesses, their strengths, their power. Several attacks from his friends didn't seem to be working. Knowing he was their trump card, his hand shot up to his mask as he ran through the list of his personas.

"I'm tired of people like you pushing around those you perceive to be weak."

Makoto's voice pulled him from his mental selections and he turned to her with a retort on his tongue. "Makoto-,"

"But I am not weak." She took one step towards Kaneshiro while Ren took one towards her. "You will *not* use me to get to my sister. You will *not* use me to get to Sanada. You will *not* intimidate me anymore!"

When he lifted his hand to grab her arm, an unknown force stopped him. For half a second, the world went dark around him. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't see. He couldn't move. However, when that moment was over, Makoto's hands flew to her head. He would have stood next to her, but there was a powerful force field that prevented him from moving any closer.

It wasn't until Morgana's voice shouted out from behind him that he was able to understand what was happening. "It's another persona?!"

It was hard to watch her struggle to contain the power that was surrounding her, that was keeping him from reaching out to her, that

was pushing everyone else *away* from her. He wanted to tell her to keep fighting, but the words died on his tongue as he listened to her agonizing cries and being unable to help. He gave her a lot of credit for never once collapsing to the ground, despite knowing what kind of pain was crushing her right now.

Then, Ren watched in awestruck horror as Makoto ripped her mask off her face with a heart wrenching scream. The energy and aura that surrounded her was impressive enough that the shadows stopped their movements and Kaneshiro actually took several steps back in fear. When the energy neutralized, Makoto sat on a motorcycle, *a persona* , hands on each of the handlebars, looking comfortable and relaxed as if she had been riding the thing her entire life.

“Wow…”

“Oh, shit that’s way too badass.”

Ren, however, could say nothing. He was far too drawn into the girl before him to find words to even speak. There was always something special about watching his teammates reach into their hearts and give life to their persona, but Makoto was different. He had a desire to protect her and to keep her out of trouble, but as he stared at her now, ready to lash out at the shadows surrounding them, he didn’t see that scared girl holding on to his arm.

He saw a powerful woman crushing every obstacle that stood in her way.

It was hard to find his breath, but eventually a gust of wind directly behind him brought him out of his daze. He turned to Morgana, the remnants of Zorro fading away, a shadow Oni falling to its knees a few meters away.

“We need to clear a path to get out of here,” Morgana yelled to the group. “We’re far too outnumbered.”

A bright and electrifying blue caught a nearby enemy and the shadow disintegrated into nothing. Ren snapped his head back to Makoto, perched on her bike and revving the motor. The sight put

him back into another haze, but he shook his head before it suffocated him again. He wanted to thank her, to say *something* to her, but her eyes found a spot several meters above him. She narrowed her eyes, her hands tightening around the handles, and he looked over his shoulder to find a terrified Kaneshiro running farther back into his fortress.

“Kill them all! I am paying you to *kill them!”*

The shadows began to multiply around them, but to his surprise, Makoto appeared ready to face the new challenge. His biggest fear was that she was pushing herself too far after awakening to her power, and it finally produced words for him to speak.

“Stop. We need to get out of here.”

He worried for a second that she didn’t hear him or that she had and chose not to listen. But even with the darkening scowl on her face, she rotated her bike around to face the exit rather than give chase after Kaneshiro.

“Get on and let’s go!”

There were enemies charging after them, but he stood still like he had been struck with some god awful attack. Did…did she seriously want him to get on her bike *with her?* She gave him a glare and called out to him again, but it wasn’t until Morgana transformed into the van that he came back to his senses.

He took one step, his heart hammering in his chest. “Joker! Let’s go!!”

Deciding he had already wasted enough time *standing around* , he shook his head and tried to pretend he wasn’t about to throw his arms around a girl he had a *serious* crush on now and that it wasn’t super-hot that she was the one in control and he was a little scared of riding on a motorcycle…

It was *extremely* difficult for him to think when his arms tightened around her waist as she roared her persona to life and sped off after Morgana. Had she done this before? She seemed rather at ease if

this was her first time operating a motorcycle, but she never struck him as the type. Hell, there was probably a long list of things he didn't know about her.

When they returned to Shibuya Station after their escape, Makoto collapsed against the wall. Ryuji rudely stepped in front of him and prevented him from reaching out to ask her if she was alright.

"Dude! That was super sick! I am way jealous of you now!"

Morgana pranced around him and up to where Makoto sat. "That was really amazing! You're going to make a great addition to our team!"

"Guys, give her some space!" Ann pushed Ryuji back into him and swept her foot at Morgana. She then turned to face Makoto. "How are you feeling?"

Makoto's head fell to her knees. "That was quite exhausting."

A small smile came to his face. He was grateful that she had listened to him and left the palace rather than keep on fighting. She lifted her head to look at each of them. "I'm sorry for causing you all so much trouble."

Ryuji threw his hands behind his head. "Nah, don't worry. This is gonna be way cooler now!"

"It would seem you are willing to fight alongside us, yes?"

Ren waited impatiently for Makoto to answer Yusuke's question. Would she join their party? He doubted she would say no, given her previous level of excitement to help, but now that she had a first-hand experience of what was waiting for them, would she go again? Was it too much for her? Would he not be able to see her destroy shadows with that awesome power of hers?

"I've caused you all so much trouble, but," she said as she pushed herself to her feet. That fire burned in her eyes again and it took his breath away. "This time, I'm going to fight."

He offered her a warm smile when her eyes met his. "Welcome

aboard.”

Chapter 39

Chapter 39

He was going to always be dancing with death, wasn't he?

Times like this made him wish the damn music would stop playing and someone would just *let him die* already.

"Akihiko?"

He was in far too much pain to figure out who was talking to him, if he was even alive. It sure as hell wasn't Shinji, so he knew he wasn't dead. At this point, he either wanted the strength to open his eyes and figure it out for himself or just fall back into the darkness and let fate guide him in one direction or the other.

"Akihiko."

The sharp tone made him wince and he was able to at least lift a hand to try and swat the voice away. It didn't work. "You've been resting long enough. Wake up."

Had he? He felt like he hadn't been resting *at all* . How did he get here? Where *was* here? A hospital? Why was he in a hospital again? Surely the bed at home would have been more comfortable to sleep on. Home, with Minako and Makoto and a nice dinner and some epic painkillers because god *damn* he was in pain.

Minako!

He tried to sit up, tried to call out for her, but he felt a hand push him back down into the bed (he didn't get very far to begin with). He at least had the strength to will his eyes to open enough to take in his surroundings. He had to blink several times, fighting back the pain that shot up his right side at the littlest of movements, before he realized what was happening.

Mitsuru was the one sitting by his bedside, which made him both

relieved and uneasy. If she was there, where was Minako? Furious with him for the last time? Did he finally push her too far with this little stunt of his? What did he do to get hospitalized again?

A grin tugged at Mitsuru's lips. "Minako's been here every chance she can get." She pointed to his other side, and it took far more energy to turn his head than he thought. But then a different kind of pain set in his heart. Minako was asleep, curled up uncomfortably on a sofa chair in the corner of the room. How she managed to fall asleep in her position he didn't want to know. But she looked fine, just slightly awkward, so he returned his attention back to Mitsuru.

"How long have I been out?"

The question had been difficult to get out of his throat, but Mitsuru found it humorous enough. "You've been completely out for two days. You've been in and out of consciousness for another two."

Assuming his brain was still functioning correctly, that would mean he had been unconscious for *four* days… He pushed himself up… tried anyway, but the second he moved, a shockwave of pain shot up his leg and knocked the breath out of his lungs.

"You shouldn't be moving too much."

He shook his head. "I've been out for *four* days?!"

"And you'll be in the hospital for several more at the rate you're healing."

He dropped his head into the pillow and groaned loudly. Why the hell did his leg hurt so much? How close to death did he really come this time? Every little memory was swimming around in his mind, but there was still a cloud of confusion wiping out the specific details. He closed his eyes in a better effort to *think* .

He was in the hospital. He was hurt. His knee burned like hell, his shoulder burned but not as badly, and his jaw hurt like he had been in a fight. He fought someone, *people* , because his fingers felt sore and that only happened after spending way too much time at the gym punching the bag.

There were a lot of shadows and purples. Where the hell had he been? Kabukicho? No, he was transferred to Shibuya, right? Had that happened? Blond. He ran into Ryuji. Ryuji had friends. Another blonde girl. A sickly-looking teenager. Amamiya. What had they been doing?

Makoto.

This time, he fought through the pain to pull himself into a seated position, the air becoming too thick for his lungs. “Where’s Makoto? Is she okay?!”

Mitsuru put another hand on his shoulder. “She’s fine, Akihiko. She’s at school at the moment.”

As his mind stopped running a million kilometers per second, he thought that maybe he dreamt the entire ordeal. He never met Kaneshiro. He never got shot in the leg. There was no sixty million yen blackmail hanging over his daughter’s head. Makoto wasn’t that stupid to run off and tangle with the *mafia.*

Right?

“Minako told me what happened.”

Wrong .

A hand ran over his face as he let his memories take their toll on him. “I can’t believe this.”

Mitsuru leaned back in her seat and crossed her arms, her brows furrowing together in thought. “Sixty million yen is an impressive amount of money to come up with in three weeks.”

“Is that why you’re here?” As much as he hated to admit it, he had borrowed money from her in the past when he was at his wits end. He had been able to pay her back for most of it, but she always told him that he had been a great help to her, so it hadn’t been necessary. Thanks to her, he was able to give Sae something for her birthday and for Christmas when she was little, and had been able to keep his promise to Minako every year. But…he couldn’t keep asking her for money when his back was up against the wall,

especially with how much he needed now.

Mitsuru, however, seemed to take offense to his question. “Am I not allowed to check in on you when I find out your recklessness has put you in the hospital?”

He leaned forward and held his face in both of his hands. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re lucky you’re not dead, Akihiko.”

No matter how old they got, she would always make him feel like a child whenever he did something wrong. “That man held my daughter hostage. What else did you want me to do?”

He heard her sigh. “You didn’t even call for backup and your foolishness put two other teenagers in danger.”

He groaned into his hands. “No, I wasn’t thinking right. All I wanted was to find Makoto and make sure she was okay! I didn’t care about anything else!”

“And now you’re in debt to the man for *sixty million yen!”*

His fists slammed onto the mattress at his sides. “Damn it, I know that! I’ll…I’ll figure out something…”

Another sigh escaped from the woman next to him. “Sixty million isn’t something I can come up with overnight, but,” she said, her voice losing the edge. “I will need some time. I will try and contact other people I know to see if they can help.”

He was slowly losing his will to fight. “Don’t. This is my fault, so I will-,”

She grabbed the fabric by his chest and yanked him towards her. For half a second, he was blinded by pain, but then Mitsuru’s glare cleared that all away. “How the hell are you going to collect that much money? And at what cost, Akihiko? What will happen to you and to your family if you cashed in on every little thing you could? Let me help you.”

He swatted her hand off him. “And what the hell is going to happen

to *you?* Sixty million is too much money for your company to just *hand* over! I can't ask this of you!"

She slapped him. Hard. Hard enough that he heard the echo in the silence that followed. "When I needed you to help me, you were there for me. You and Minako have sacrificed enough for me and my family. It's *money* , Akihiko. Money we can get back. But if you try and do this alone, you will lose the last thing holding you and your family together."

He was so angry, but yet, he had nowhere to direct his anger. He knew she was right, but that didn't mean he wanted her to go through all of this trouble for his sake. Not that if he denied her he would be better off, but *sixty million yen* ? Who has that kind of money hiding in their wallet or bank account to just write a check and send it without batting an eye?

"Aki?"

He turned his head and his burning fury died off and was replaced with a crushing guilt as Minako crashed into him. He winced when her arm rubbed up against the burn on his shoulder, but he didn't say anything to her.

"I'm so glad you're okay."

It was never easy to see Minako so torn up over a trip to the hospital, but it was also nice to be reminded of what he could have lost had he decided to stop fighting and not wake up. His hands found their way into her hair as he pressed his head against hers. "I'm sorry, Minako."

She held on to him tightly. "One day, you're not going to come back to me."

The air flew out of his lungs and he suddenly wished she would slap him, too. "I promised you I would keep fighting." He kissed the side of her head. "So don't be so easy to give up on me."

He felt her laugh in his arms and she leaned back to rub her eyes. "I'm going to have to lock both you and Makoto in your rooms for the

rest of your lives.”

Minako then leaned back into his chest and his hands dropped to wrap around her waist. Neither one of them said anything more to the other, but Mitsuru finally broke up the silence.

“I will keep you both in touch with what happens. Just,” she whispered, standing up from her seat and dropping her eyes to the floor. “Let me take care of this.”

He wanted to protest, but then he had to tell himself of the consequences. Consequences that if he turned her down would cost him everything. “Thank you.”

She nodded to both of them and grabbed the bag by her feet. “I do believe you’ll be staying out of trouble with your extended hospital stay and the inability to walk anywhere.” She cracked a smile. “But if I find out you’re diving into more problems, you will regret it.”

He didn’t need to be told twice.

Mitsuru left without another word and he sighed deeply. Despite the heavy burden of the money issue being lifted off his chest, he still felt terrible. He didn’t know how long he would be out with his injury. He wanted to help, even if it was in the smallest way possible. He couldn’t just sit in a hospital bed and let one of his best friends make amends for his faults *again* .

Because what would happen after that? Kaneshiro wouldn’t stop scamming anyone. The man created a target on his back, so who’s to say that he wouldn’t send out more men to kill him, especially knowing he was in a weakened state? Or go after Makoto? Or Ryuji? Or Amamiya? How did he know Kaneshiro wouldn’t swindle them for more money when he got his cut in three weeks?

“Sae came to see you.”

His heart skipped a beat. “What?”

“No matter what she says, I know she worries when she finds out you’re in the hospital.”

And of course he would have been unconscious and unable to speak to her. “Is she okay?”

Minako placed a hand on his arm. “She wasn’t happy with you, but she said she would find Kaneshiro and bring him in.” She tilted her head back to look up at him. “She didn’t say this, but I think she’s doing it for you.”

While a part of him was touched that Sae had stopped by to check on him, he was terrified that if it became known that she was looking for Kaneshiro, he would make a move to get her. Hadn’t he threatened her, too?

He tried to push Minako off of him so he could find a phone to call Sae and tell her it was fine, that he would bring down Kaneshiro on his own. However, Minako didn’t have to fight him too hard to keep him in his spot.

“Stop, Aki. I know you want to protect her, but this is her job.”

“She’s my *daughter* .” He clenched his hands. “He already went after Makoto and he won’t hesitate to go after Sae!”

Minako exhaled in frustration. “You need to put more faith in her. She knows what she’s doing.”

“You don’t understand…”

She pulled away from him completely. “Aki, how many other dangerous criminals has Sae put in jail?”

He opened his mouth to respond to her, until he realized he didn’t have an answer. “I…I don’t know.”

“That’s right, you don’t know.” He felt her glare before he saw it. “What’s so special about this one that she would willingly accept your protection? How do you even know he’s all that dangerous compared to someone else that she’s thrown in jail?” She heaved a sigh. “I know you care about her, but you need to learn to trust her.”

“I trusted Makoto too and look what *she* did!”

The silence that fell between the two of them was almost as painful as his wound on his leg. Finally, Minako pushed herself off of the bed and stood next to him. “Sae isn’t Makoto, Aki. And I think it’s time you realized that.”

To his surprise, she didn’t leave the room. She instead returned to the seat she had fallen asleep on and pulled her phone from her bag. “I already told Makoto that she’s only allowed to and from school and she can’t go anywhere else until I can trust her again. She may have caused a lot of trouble, but she recognizes that. She’ll be staying out of trouble for a while.”

He let himself fall back on the bed. He knew the argument was a lost cause on his end, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t going to worry about Sae. Sure she had been taking care of herself *successfully* over the years, but if he knew she was in trouble, he would have done anything to help her.

“No you wouldn’t.”

Is that why she was so bitter with him that night? Because men like Kaneshiro threatened her constantly and he never bothered to ask her if she was okay?

“Sae would talk to you if she was in trouble, right?”

He saw Minako lift her head from the corner of his eyes. “What?”

He took a deep breath and kept his eyes on the ceiling. “If Sae was in trouble, would she tell you?” He turned his head to look at her. “And would you tell me?”

The phone came to rest on her thigh. “Aki, you need to trust her.”

“I just want her to know that I would do anything for her if she needed me.”

A softer expression came to Minako’s face. “I think she knows that.”

“No you wouldn’t.”

Something painful shot through his heart, but he chose to ignore it.

Minako chose to let him sit in silence and went back to her phone. Between the medication and spending what little amount of strength he had to use for the day on arguments, he felt the fatigue begin to creep into his muscles. He wanted to stay awake, to talk to Minako about something other than everything he *couldn't* do, but when he opened his mouth, nothing came out.

He heard her chuckle at him from her seat. "I should probably head out. I can't make sure Makoto went straight home if I'm not there to greet her."

"Please don't go."

It was a pathetic attempt to get her to stay and bring some form of happiness back into his system, but it worked. She smiled at him and took a seat next to him on the bed. "You're tired."

He reached for one of her hands. "I'm tired of being tired."

"Maybe you should stop getting hurt and landing yourself in the hospital," she said with a laugh. "You're getting to that age now where you should think about retiring."

"I am *not* that old!"

She continued to laugh at him and the scowl on his face and brushed a hand through his hair. "But wouldn't that be nice, just to sit around and do whatever we wanted for the rest of our lives together?"

The smile on her face and the tone in her voice made every bit of pain disappear from his body. "I would give you a week before you killed me."

She smacked him on the shoulder and frowned at him. "I've dealt with you for this long. I think I could last a few months before I really wanted to kill you."

He laughed and her frown stretched into a smile. She continued to use the tips of her fingers to brush the hair off of his face, but when she leaned in to kiss him, he pulled her the rest of the way. This is what he wanted. Her. The love she still managed to carry for him

was the antidote for all his worries, his pain, his anger. Why did the doctors even have him on an IV and pain medication when the cure for all his ailments was sitting right next to him?

However, she pulled away when there was a light buzz on the bed. She felt around him for the phone she had dropped by his side. He felt something cold land in the pit of his stomach when she read the message on her phone with a frantic look on her face.

“I-Is something wrong?”

Another message popped up on her phone. This one took the wind out of her and for a second, he thought she was going to throw the device across the room.

“Minako?”

She pushed herself off the bed and to her feet, marching off to pick up her bag by the chair. He called out to her again just before she was able to make it out the door.

“What happened?”

He really didn’t want her to leave on a sour note, considering that he was feeling so much better before the messages started coming. She grabbed the bag around her shoulder and turned to him, her eyes full of anger, a look he hadn’t seen in years.

“Mitsuru said she saw our daughter roaming around Shibuya with a group of friends.”

Akihiko could feel his heart jump in his throat. “W-What?”

“Oh, don’t worry, honey.” Her tone was enough to frighten him, even if she wasn’t angry with him. “I’ll take care of this.”

And she stormed out of the room before he could say another word.

Chapter 40

Chapter 40

Makoto had been terrified when she realized the gravity of the situation as Kaneshiro's men grabbed at her once she was inside the club. She had been terrified watching her dad try and fight the men off with a bullet lodged in his leg. She had been terrified when the one man held him and pointed a gun to his head. She had been terrified when her dad fought out of the man's grip and before she could reach the gun, Kaneshiro beat her to it and held it to *her* head.

But even after all of that, it all paled in comparison to her mother's wrath.

And if *that* hadn't been frightening enough, her sister stood behind her when she finally returned home.

The door closed behind her with the loudest *click* she had ever heard in her life. Both her mom and her sister glared at her, the dark brown color of their eyes glowing bright red in fury. She was always under the impression that *burning alive* would feel hot, but she was frozen solid by fear.

Her sister was the first one to approach her. Without saying a word, she grabbed Makoto's shoulder and dug her nails into her skin. When she winced in pain, Sae's voice screamed in her ears. "I *told* you to stay away from him!"

Makoto knew there was a chance Sae would find out about her little tango with Kaneshiro, but never in a million years did she picture her this *angry* . "I-I'm sorry."

"You're *sorry?!"* For a minute, Makoto thought she was going to hit her. "You put Akihiko in the hospital! You're lucky he's not dead because of you! You're a target for one of the most dangerous criminals in Tokyo! You *promised* you would stay away from him!"

It hurt to see her sister so upset because of something she did, but

she felt even worse because she had *scared* her. Sae was never a lot of emotions besides angry, so her heart cracked when she realized her sister was yelling out of fear over her safety.

However, after her first full day as a Phantom Thief and making impressive headway in Kaneshiro's palace (Ren had told her that), she had hope that she could turn this entire situation around. How she was going to go about telling her mom and her sister that without revealing what she was doing…

"I told you to come straight home, Makoto."

Maybe she would try once her mom vented? "I know."

She didn't have to see the glare in her eyes to know it was there. "Look at me." She knew better than to disobey. "Why were you out in Shibuya when you were supposed to come home?"

Between the looks she received from Sae and her mother, she had no idea how the words managed to get out of her mouth. "I want to help."

It was clearly not what her mom wanted to hear. "I *told* you to let us handle this! Do you…do you *enjoy* finding ways to get yourself into trouble?!"

"Well, no…"

"Your father could have been *killed* , Makoto!" It had been years since her mother had yelled at her like this. "And yet, you take off to look for something else to get into the first chance you get! Do you know what you would do to him if he found out you were *hurt,* or *missing,* or *dead?"*

She didn't want to think about it.

"It must be nice to always have someone to clean up your messes."

Her sister's words stung more than all of the anger combined. "I know that."

"You fall into a ridiculous debt of sixty million yen and someone

picks up your tab." Sae crossed her arms, a mocking smile playing on her lips. "You barge into a known criminal's hideout and your father comes rushing to the rescue. Maybe you should get yourself into more trouble, Makoto. See what happens when *no one* is there for you."

"Sae, stop that." Makoto hadn't expected her mom to defend her, even if her voice was half as powerful as Sae's had been. "Makoto, I know you're growing up and you want to do things your way, but sometimes I don't understand what goes through your head. How could you have thought anything *good* would have come from this?"

Her head fell to her chest, wishing she had the strength to speak her mind, but failing to find her voice under the tension in the room.

Sae chuckled next to her. "Maybe you should come up with the money on your own and-,"

"And then what?"

Sae and her mom both fell into silence at her interruption, but before she lost her heart, she kept talking. "This man isn't only hurting me. This man will not *stop* with me. Yes, I was stupid for charging into Kaneshiro's club without thinking things through, and yes, I know I owe my dad my life, and yes, I know how much money I owe."

She lifted her head to find her mom staring back at her in shock. Her sister wore a similar expression, but she appeared slightly more angry. Makoto took a deep breath, but kept her head up as she spoke again. "I don't want to run from my mistakes anymore. I don't want someone else to feel obligated to clean up after me. I know I have no right to ask this of either of you after what I've done, but…I want you to trust me."

There was a long, tense moment of silence before Sae lifted a hand to her head. "Are you saying that you're going to single-handedly bring down someone like Kaneshiro? He's been evading the police for *years* . Rumor has it that Kaneshiro actually escaped from Kabukicho when Akihiko started turning the district around and fell off the map. So how are *you,"* Sae added with a darkening tone. "A *child* , going to do what hundreds of *trained* people cannot?"

Makoto knew Sae expected an answer, but for the time being, she couldn't offer her anything. Her sister found her silence amusing before she turned back to their mother. "I've taken this case, so all you should have to do is watch *her* before she winds up getting herself *killed* ." Before she left, Sae gave her one last glare. "So be a good little girl and keep out of trouble. I won't let you screw this up for me."

She felt something *cold* as she met her sister's eyes. Not being as experienced as Ren or the others, she couldn't really say if what she was feeling was her persona reaching out to her or not. But why? She wasn't in any danger…right now anyway. But as soon as she might have been able to label it, it disappeared and Sae slammed the door behind her.

She exhaled deeply and tried to gain control over her racing heart. She still felt a light buzz throughout her nerves, but she shook her head and the feeling faded with it. When she turned to face her mom, she still wore a look of surprise. However, instead of a glare, her expression relaxed to the point Makoto thought she saw a smile.

"What's happened to you?"

This was a conversation she really didn't want to have. While her mom might not be so angry and upset with her, she sure as hell didn't want her to think her youngest daughter had lost her mind when she told her what she was doing. Regardless of if she ever told her mom the truth, she could sense something had changed in Makoto. And it was a *good* thing. This sense of pride must have been how it felt to finally *grow up* . She wasn't a child anymore, despite her recent childish decisions.

But then, "When are you going to properly introduce your boyfriend?"

Embarrassingly enough, it took Makoto a few seconds to register what her mom had even asked. But when she did, her hands flew to cover her face and it was suddenly too hot inside the apartment. "M-Mom!"

"I saw the way he looked at you the other night."

How did that make her think Ren was her *boyfriend?* “He’s not my… my *boyfriend* .”

Her mom continued to smile at her. “Then how else do you explain this change in you?”

Is this what her mom had gone through with her dad? Had she been quiet and did stupid things until he said something to her that resonated in her, or had she said something to him? “H-He just said something to me…that’s all.”

She had hoped that she would have stopped questioning her, but her mom took a step towards her. “What did he say to you?”

Makoto tried not to sigh to give her the wrong impression. “He just told me that being afraid will never solve anything.” The blush on her face faded away, but she found herself comfortably warm when she met her mother’s eyes. “So I’m not afraid anymore.”

Her mom took a seat on the closest couch and for a moment, Makoto worried that she would start yelling at her again. She *did* tell her she would come home after school and did *not* …

“Your father wants you to stay his little girl forever.” A sad smile came to her mom’s face. “He doesn’t want you to grow up and watch you move on with your life. But, I do. I want to see what you do with your life. I want to watch you become proud of the person you will be, just like your sister has.”

When she lifted a hand to her head, Makoto worried about what she was going to say next. “You frustrate me just as much as your father. I never know what you two are thinking or why you do the things that you do. And that’s why I’m scared. Especially when I tell you to do something and you don’t do it.”

“I’m sorry, Mom.”

She ignored her. “This is the first time I’ve ever seen you stand up for yourself, Makoto. You never speak your mind or give us your opinion because you don’t want to offend anyone. And since I know you get that from me, I can tell that something has changed in you.”

Her mom studied her with a look that made her break eye contact. “But I don’t know what.”

“Oh…” Should she tell her? Would she know she was hiding something if she tried to play it off? Would she even believe her if she told her the truth? “Maybe watching Dad get hurt and keep fighting for me did something good for me.”

Her mom shook her head. “This is more recent.”

Great. But if she told her mom about her friends, she felt like she would be betraying them. A brand-new comrade and she spills the beans the first time she gets backed into a corner. “I…I finally have some friends.”

And it was true. She never had friends to begin with. Not anyone she felt like she didn’t have to impress, or live up to outrageous expectations. She may still want to do her best, to not drag her team down, but all of them had been so understanding. They would accept her shortcomings. They would help her if she needed it.

She finally had a place to belong.

She felt an arm wrap around her shoulder and she was pulled into her mother. “I’ve always wanted this day to come, but maybe now I understand why your dad doesn’t want you to grow up.” Her mom released her and gave her a warm smile. “But I’m so happy that you’re feeling proud of who you are.”

It was the first time in quite some time that she didn’t feel uncomfortable at her mother’s praise. It was nice to hear that she approved of her change. Now, if only she could do the same with her dad.

“Do you think Dad will be happy for me too?”

Her mom chuckled. “Your dad can be quite difficult to understand. I know he wants you to stay a child, but he needs to learn to accept that you’re *not* anymore. And I think he’s coming to realize that. But like everything else, he needs some time. Don’t let it discourage you, alright?”

Makoto tried to take her words to heart. She knew it wasn't going to be easy since she *had* been the reason he was in the hospital to begin with. It was nice to know her mother found her change to be a good thing, regardless of whether or not she knew *how* it came about. But…she still worried her dad would never give her the chance to prove herself after her last little stunt.

She felt a hand on her shoulder. "Don't be afraid of who you are, Makoto. I know your dad will be proud of you as well. Just let him vent for a few days, okay? And I'll deal with him during that time, trust me." Then that sparkle came to her eyes and Makoto held her breath. "Don't let him know about your *boyfriend* though."

Makoto groaned while her mom laughed at her own comment. "I'm not dating him! I don't want to date him!"

"I'm sure you don't…"

What she wouldn't admit to her mother was that she was pretty sure she wasn't his type. That she was fairly sure Ren was dating Ann, or with her some way. That she had overheard a few students recently talk about how boys were intimidated by strong-willed girls. That there was a slight distance between the two of them ever since he caught her following him around weeks ago.

So, she huffed at her mother and walked over to sit on the couch. "He's just a friend. And he'll only be a friend. I promise."

It was a lot harder to say out loud than she thought.

Chapter 41

Chapter 41

She was fuming.

She was pretty sure the temperature around her increased because of her rage.

She felt as if she was parting the seas *with a look* as crowds of people moved out of her way before she crashed into them.

She thought the ground was shaking under her with every step she took.

She almost threw a punch into Akechi's face when she realized he was standing in front of her. "So, I take it today is not a good day for sushi?"

Sae said nothing to him as she walked around him and into the station. Her mind was racing, but completely blank at the same time. She had spent a few hours of her morning trying to get her thoughts out onto a piece of scratch paper, but the second she wrote a familiar name, she would press too hard on her pen and the damn thing would snap in two. Which is why she told herself that her afternoon would be better spent focusing on something *other* than the recently developed argument with her sister.

She told herself to take it one case at a time. The incident with Makoto and Kaneshiro was still too fresh in her mind, too raw and emotional for her to think clearly, so she chose to work on the mental shutdown case in the afternoon. Just thinking about her sister's foolish actions caused all her anger to reemerge as powerfully as it had when she first found out about her storming off into the club. And then she had the gall to try and convince her *she* would do something about Kaneshiro.

Well, if Makoto did anything else to get herself into trouble, Sae sure as hell wasn't going to do anything to help. Akihiko sure as hell

couldn't *do* anything to help. She doubted their mother would even have the ability to help.

Her hands clenched at her side. Why was Makoto acting like this? Did her sister think she was *lying* about how dangerous Kaneshiro was? Did her sister think she was *lying* about Kaneshiro being the one who wanted her father *dead?* But then a few days later, after meeting the man face to face, putting a bullet through Akihiko's leg, and blackmailing her with sixty million yen…she thought that she could *do something?*

She loved Makoto, even if it was hard for her to admit at times, but over the past few weeks, Sae slowly began to *hate* her. She was eighteen now. She was an adult. But yet everyone continued to treat her like she was a child. Where had her parents been when *she* was struggling to make ends meet in college? Or when *she* was denied her first promising job because she was a *girl?* Or when *she* had nightmares about her first several cases where she thought the men were going to follow through on their threats and *murder* her?

Makoto needed to grow up. Her parents weren't always going to be able to protect her, and if she didn't start learning now, she never would. It was tough love. Makoto was her sister, a *Niijima,* and she needed to be strong. Not a weak little *Sanada* who would always rely on someone else.

You're just jealous because Makoto has the childhood you chose to walk away from .

Sae cursed under her breath and boarded a train bound for Yongen-Jaya. Until she was able to think about her sister calmly, she would focus her attention on something else for a while. She double-checked to make sure the file was still in her bag, then checked her phone to verify the address.

Café Leblanc .

The thought of coffee was her only ray of sunshine as she stepped off the train. She hadn't been sleeping well, thanks to her beloved sister and nightmares about never being able to rub her accomplishments in Akihiko's face again. A bit more (a lot more,

actually) caffeine sounded glorious. She followed the signs towards the south exit, her earlier anger fading away the closer she came to the café. She didn't realize how tired she was until she pushed open the door and fell into the closest seat at the bar.

The owner, her target, Sojiro Sakura, put his paper down and reached for the cigarette dangling between his lips. "What can I get for you?"

The file indicated that Sakura had some relationship with Isshiki, but how far that went, she couldn't find out. They were at least friendly with each other, but what she *did* know was that after her untimely death, Isshiki's daughter, Futaba, had eventually come under Sakura's protection. She didn't care who she got her information from, but she *needed* it from someone. She *had* to find her ground in the case that was causing frowns and looks of disapproval throughout the office.

She would not let this case make a fool of her.

But, she really needed some coffee. "I'll take a house blend, please."

Coming to a quiet corner of Tokyo for coffee was pretty nice. Her eyes found the wall of beans in front of her. She wasn't a big fan of the drink, more a fan of what it did to her, but she still found it impressive to look at what went into the process. The fact that she couldn't point to one jar of beans and explain what its difference was from another made her falter for a second. She didn't like *not knowing* , and yet, here she was, staring at a wall of coffee beans and growing curious to know more.

She snapped out of her thoughts when Sakura dropped her cup off in front of her. "You've got an eye for the coffee beans I see."

She was slightly embarrassed for having been caught doing something *other* than her job, but she said nothing in response and lifted the cup from its plate. "Thank you."

The man took no offense and reached for the paper he had discarded moments ago. She decided it was best to let him grow more comfortable with her presence first before diving into her

interrogation. However, the first sip of her drink did more for her system than she thought it would have. She felt oddly more relaxed, but alert. She was used to the taste of black coffee, the bitterness of it, but this tasted different. Fresh. Smooth. Almost as if he had brewed it with some kind of cream…

“This is very good.” Sae was not one to give compliments, being someone that believed in working hard without the need for praise, but she couldn’t help it. It was more a thought spoken out loud, one that the barista just happened to catch.

He grinned while never looking over at her. “Jamaican Blue Mountain. Usually a good go-to for new customers.”

Sae also wasn’t very good about keeping a conversation going when she had no knowledge on the topic or the people involved. It was something she envied about her mother, being able to talk to anyone about anything at any time. She liked to tell Sae that she was very much like her sister, and they both kept to themselves like their father liked to…

She could feel her blood start to warm and *not* because of the coffee. So before she lost her composure, she returned her attention to the drink in her hands. Maybe after she solved this giant mess of a case, she could do some researching of her own. The coffee was *that* good to warrant some looking into. Hell, she didn’t even know where to *start* besides owning some beans and using hot water.

Makoto always thought it was “magic” when she used to watch her mother make coffee for her father every morning.

Childish.

But when the only other customer paid his tab and walked out of the building, she found her chance to bring up why she came out to this place at all. It was a wonderful change of pace, being able to turn her mind to something that wouldn’t piss her off and send her storming back through the streets. She wasn’t one to waste idle time beating around the bush, so she cut right to the chase.

“Sakura-san, does the name Wakaba Isshiki mean anything to you?”

She knew what to look for in his reaction, and she found them all in his silence. He turned to her with a glare, the newspaper falling to the countertop below it. His body was stiff, his face turning pale, and his voice tense. “W-What?!”

She took another drink. “My name is Sae Niijima, and I work for the prosecution. I’m trying to find information on a specific field of work she excelled at, which is why I am talking to you. You knew her rather well, yes?”

The man’s face scrunched into a scowl. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I highly doubt that.” She knew that Sakura had a previous job working for the government and had been in frequent contact with Isshiki and her team. He had to know more than what he was apparently willing to tell her, but she was used to the initial denials. She learned over the course of several years that people were more willing to talk when their hands were tied.

“Her daughter lives with you, correct?”

Hearing that, Sakura turned to face her fully, his eyes narrowing in rage. “You keep her out of this.”

Sae held her hands up as a sort of peace offering. “I intend to, but I need to know more about the research that Isshiki was working on for a serious case. If I cannot find out from you, then you will leave me no choice.”

The man’s palm slammed against the counter. “She’s only a child!”

“We are in agreement then,” she said as she leaned back in her seat. “Tell me about her findings on cognitive psience and I will not need to speak to her, nor will I have to draft up a warrant to find this information in your home.”

Sakura was quiet for a few moments, but the look on his face never changed. She was used to people telling her off or keeping quiet to avoid answering her questions. A little bit of patience went a long way. But sadly, she didn’t think she could take too much more of his

games.

This case was important to her. She had taken it in hopes of solving it on day one with the first accident. After reading the report that had landed on her desk, she figured someone was trying to screw with her, until she spoke to the conductor herself. She knew something was off, but it grew much more apparent with the second subway accident. Annoyingly thanks to Akechi, she finally had a leg to stand on. Sakura had another thing coming if she thought he was intimidating her and that she would walk away without a fight.

She didn't need the praise for a job well done. A victory would be more than enough for her. Enough to take it back to Akihiko and tell him, *Are you proud of me now, Father?* The thought alone brought a smirk to her face, gave her another jolt of determination to see this through, and surprisingly she was okay walking away. For today.

"I will give you some time to think on it," she said quietly, grabbing her wallet from her bag and placing a few coins on the counter by her finished drink. "I'll be back to continue this conversation another time."

She didn't tell him that in that time, she would dig into *his* past, or that she would find something else to use as bait to get him to talk. She may have overstepped her bounds on her first meeting, but she was so close to her goal. She could feel it. Sakura was the key to unlocking a wave of information that would let her bring this case to a close. And with it, she would get everything she wanted.

People around the office would respect her.

People on the streets would fear her.

Her sister would start *listening* to her.

Her mother would regret choosing a side that wasn't hers.

Akihiko would be devastated he couldn't brag to the world about how amazing his first daughter was.

She was in such a fantastic mood that she reached for her phone as she waited for the train back to Shibuya. *I could go for some sushi*

tonight. My treat.

Akechi's response was instantaneous. *Kaiten or bar?*

He grated her nerves most of the time, but she was far too pleased with herself and the progress they were making to care this time around. *So long as it's a quiet enough venue.*

I take it you learned something from Sakura-san?

The train approached and she stepped into the car, feeling much lighter and attentive, thanks to the coffee and knowing she was finally going to get some answers. She sent one last message to Akechi before she tossed her phone in her bag.

Where am I meeting you?

Chapter 42

Chapter 42

“Where do you think you’re going?”

Akihiko thought he had good balance with the crutch supporting his right side, but Minako’s tone proved him wrong. Thankfully he was able to catch himself with a hand on the wall before he fell to the ground. “Um. I want to go out.”

“And do what?”

His second day back from after a week in the hospital and he was fed up with being kept indoors. It wasn’t like he was going to go out and get into a fight with Kaneshiro or follow Makoto to school or anything.

He might.

Minako probably had a right to worry.

But Makoto had left for school a few minutes ago and he wasn’t going to be able to catch up to her now. He knew he was far too weak to walk around Shibuya and hope he could recognize one of Kaneshiro’s pawns and demand another confrontation. However, he needed to *get out* . He wanted fresh air. He wanted to see people *living* .

Minako was determined to keep him from doing any of that. “Aki, I know you hate being cooped up, but you’re *hurt* . This isn’t an injury that’s going to heal overnight. Nor is it ever going to heal if you keep moving around.”

He groaned and pressed his back against the wall. “I know. But I’m going to lose my mind if I stay inside all day every day for as long as the doctor told me to stay off of it.” He ran a hand over his face. “Please, Minako. I just need to walk around.”

She stepped into him and his back straightened under her glare. “No.”

“Mina-,”

“I said, *no.* ”

There was no point in arguing with her, so he dropped his head and gave her a mumbled, “Fine,” in response. She continued to eye him for a few more minutes, then she put some distance between the two of them.

Minako headed into the living room and took a seat on the couch. She didn’t make a move to do anything, so he mustered up the strength to hobble across the room and sit next to her. She was likely worried he was going to leave whenever she turned her back, and he didn’t want her to worry about him.

“I’m sorry, Minako.” He turned in his spot, wincing slightly when he twisted his injured knee, but righted himself before he took one of her hands. “They’re thinking about letting me go back to work in a few weeks. Desk duty stuff, but…at least I’ll be working.”

Her expression remained unchanged and she slowly pulled her hand from his. “I don’t know how much more of this I can take, Aki.”

His heart came to a violent stop. “W-What do you mean?”

Both of her hands shielded her face and his breath caught in his throat. “Every time you get hurt, I lose a part of you. Every time you walk out that door, I worry something will happen to you. You didn’t wake up for four days, Aki. *Four days* .” She placed her hands on the top of her head. “The next time you leave and Mitsuru calls me, it’s going to be because you’re *dead* .”

He was tempted to laugh and tell her that he wasn’t going to go out so easily, but the way she spoke to him cut him in half. He knew that it couldn’t be easy for her to see him in a hospital bed, more of a sight recently than the years prior, but it wasn’t like he *wanted* to get hurt. He didn’t *want* to rush into danger and beg for someone to put him in the hospital.

“I’m not going to die,” he finally told her, his voice not as stern as he would have liked. “I still want to do so much with you. I want to watch Makoto go on and do whatever she wants to do. I still hope for a day to come when Sae and I can sit down and talk to each other.”

His words didn’t seem to work in his favor. She turned to him with another glare. “You’re not getting any younger. You can’t bounce back from your injuries like you used to. I don’t want you to do this anymore. I know sitting behind a desk at work isn’t your thing, so if you can’t do that, then you need to retire.”

Despite his best efforts, he couldn’t stop a weak laugh from creeping out from his throat. “I still have a few more years left in me.” And he liked to think that was the truth. Minako might have thought he was old since he couldn’t recover from a *bullet wound* in a week’s time, but he still went into a mafia-run business and beat the shit out of at least twenty people by himself. He managed to fight back even with his injury. He managed to fight when someone put a gun to his head. While he would never tell her what had happened that day, she needed to give him some more credit.

Minako also failed to have a comeback ready, so he reached out for her hand again. She tried to pull it away, but he kept a firm grip. He saw the tears in her eyes, but even if it hurt to notice, he continued to look into them.

“I know you worry about me. I know I scare you far more than I should. But I’m not ready to give up yet.” He grabbed her chin when she tried to look away. “You told me to trust Sae because she knew what she was doing. Now I need you to trust me.”

“Sae doesn’t end up in the hospital like you do.”

He felt a smile tug on his lips. “Well, no, but I also have several years on her. I’d say we’re on the same level.”

But Minako stood from the couch the next second. “I’m glad all of this is funny to you.” When he made a move for his crutch laying on the side of the couch, she spun on her heels to face him. “One day, you’re going to die. And it’s going to be out there, alone, doing your

damn job!"

He pushed himself to his feet, but put too much weight on his bad leg and tumbled into her. He expected her to push him away and keep yelling at him, but instead, she wrapped her arms around his neck and held on to him as tightly as she could.

"I don't want to lose you."

It was hard, but he managed to steady himself on his left side enough to drop his crutch and place his arms around her back. It was a little uncomfortable, but he didn't care about his pain as much as he cared about hers. His would heal, in time.

"I promised Makoto I would keep fighting, and I know I've told you the same," he whispered into her ear. "But if I had to choose between my life and any one of yours, I would give mine in a heartbeat."

She took a deep breath, but never stepped away from him. She hugged him closer. "…I-I know. But you're not as strong as you used to be."

In an attempt to make her feel better, he put his hands on her shoulders and held her at arms-length. "Hey, Makoto still can't take me out just yet. Until that happens, I'm not going anywhere."

Minako at least cracked a weak smile. "Something's changed in her, Aki."

Her voice was soft enough that he didn't feel the need to worry over her words, but he did anyway. "What do you mean?"

Akihiko was still extremely upset with Makoto and how stupid she had been to run into Kaneshiro's club without knowing the *first* thing about him. He had told her as much when she came to see him after he woke up, but instead of over-apologizing, she took his wrath very well. Now that Minako had put it out there, something *had* changed in their daughter.

He sensed it that day, that odd buzzing feeling he had felt once with Ryuji, but he assumed it was the medication and his anger. But the

more he yelled at her, the more he started to think that she either wasn't listening to him or she was taking it all in with a new level of understanding.

His first day back home, he just thought he was crazy.

"She's growing up, Aki."

That was the feeling he got that day. Despite her promise to always be his little girl, he knew she wasn't always going to be.

Minako put her hands on his chest, which caused him to jerk from his thoughts and put weight on his injured leg. With nothing to grab on to, he fell back on the couch (thankfully) and smacked the back of his head on the arm. As he moved his leg so the pain wouldn't be *burning* him alive, he thought he heard Minako laugh.

"I know you don't want to see her grow up, but she is." She knelt down next to him and brushed a hand over his hair. "You should be proud of the person she's become."

But… *why?* What brought about this change in her? Confronting a mob boss? Collecting an unpayable debt? Having her actions put him in the hospital for a week, and on medical leave from work for another few weeks after that?

He couldn't think of an answer that made sense before he heard his phone ring. Minako was kind enough to help him sit up as he reached into his pocket to pull it out. It was Mitsuru, probably calling to talk about the money, or lack thereof. He tensed and held his breath as he answered the call.

"Yes?"

He heard her chuckle over the line. "Is that how you greet a friend?"

"Sorry," he said quietly, earning a small smile from Minako, who hovered close to him. He didn't want to ask her how the situation was coming along on her end, but at the same time, he needed to know. The sooner he knew how much to come up with, the quicker he could get started.

Mitsuru thankfully picked up on the silence. “I would prefer to not have this conversation over the phone.” His heart fell into his stomach and Minako’s smile dropped. “I had to meet someone in Setagaya. I know Ebisu isn’t too far from here.”

He wasn’t all that familiar with outer districts of Tokyo, so he did a quick search of the area and he perked up immediately. “No, I can meet you so you don’t have to travel much farther.”

“You shouldn’t be walking around, Akihiko.”

Minako gave him a look to let him know she agreed with her. “Yeah, but, I know a nice place around there we could talk.”

His eyes found Minako’s, then he held a hand over his microphone. “I need to talk to her. I promise I will go meet her, then come right home. And I will rest and do whatever you tell me to for the rest of the day.”

She sighed heavily, but to his delight, she nodded her head. “I know this is important, but please, Aki, *please* tell me when you get there and when you’re leaving.” She leaned in to kiss the side of his head. “And if you do that, maybe I won’t make you regret giving me permission to have you do whatever I ask.”

His eyes widened, which earned him a playful laugh from her, and his phone almost slipped from his hand. Minako slid an arm over his shoulders. “I won’t be *too* rough, but, you were gone for over a week…”

He pushed the phone to his ear. “Café Leblanc. It’s in Yongen-Jaya. Can you meet me there?” He barely managed to ask the question before Minako moved her hand from his shoulder, down over his chest and stomach to rest on the top of his thigh. She laughed at him, but she was close enough to him that her breath tickled the side of his face and…

“I will meet you at the station then.”

She then ended the call, but the *click* was enough for him to

remember why Mitsuru had likely wanted to speak to him in the first place. His mind shifted from the playful and flirty and *beautiful* woman next to him and to the enormous burden Mitsuru was willing to shoulder for him and his daughter.

It was still very difficult to push her advances away. “I need to talk to her real quick.”

“I know, Aki,” she added with another round of giggles. “I’m just giving you a hard time.” He made one move to stand up, but she put a hand on his chest to stop him. Her smirk only intimidated him. “I’m glad to know you feel this way though.”

He groaned and pushed himself off the couch. He had to use her for leverage until she passed him his crutch, then she gave him a quick peck on the lips. “Please, be careful.” Her previous energy turned into a flash of sadness. “If you don’t get any good news, come home and we can talk. Don’t do anything rash, okay?” Her arms snaked around his neck and she squeezed him before pulling away. “And remember, you told me you would do whatever I asked for the rest of the day.”

He was pretty sure his face was still burning when he stepped off the train at Yongen-Jaya. Mitsuru was easy enough to spot, her unusual dark red hair almost as easy to catch as Ryuji’s bright blond hair. But as soon as her eyes met his, he felt the world collapse beneath him.

“Will you at least tell me if this is going to be good or bad news?”

She gave off a breathless chuckle, but she didn’t answer his question. “You seem to be managing alright for someone in your condition.”

The entire walk to the café, he kept telling himself that Mitsuru would have said something to him if this was *bad* news. She might need some more time to collect the money, but if it wouldn’t work out, she would have told him.

“Sanada-san?”

Hearing his name, he came to a stop right outside the shop. Amamiya stood in front of him, clad in his school uniform, and he stared back at him with wide eyes.

“What are you doing here?” He didn’t think that the kid would come out this way for work since he was heading to school, but, maybe to escort Sakura-san to the café? It was weird, but he let it slide because standing too long was bad for his leg and he didn’t come here to have a nice chat with him for not *listening* to him. Or to thank him for being in Kaneshiro’s club when he needed him.

Amamiya glanced over to Mitsuru and exchanged a look with her, he thought, before he shook his head and bowed. “It’s a habit of mine to check in on Sakura-san before I go to school.” He stood up straight. “I’m glad to know that you’re doing better.”

“You should get to school before you’re late,” he said, and Amamiya nodded once and walked past them towards the station. He kept him in his sights until Mitsuru came to stand in his view.

“You know him?”

Akihiko cocked his head. “Do you?”

A hand came to her chin and she was quiet for a few seconds, thinking. About what, he had no idea. A minute later, she shook her head and pointed to the door. “Shall we?”

Right. Back to business. No more distractions. He took a seat across from the coffee siphon and he could feel Mitsuru giving him a curious look. She said nothing to him as she pulled out the chair beside him. Sakura came out from the tiny kitchen. He recognized him and the man’s face relaxed as he approached the two of them.

“It’s good to see you again.” It was nice to hear. “Kid told me you were hurt.”

Kid? Amamiya?

“You two are acquainted as well?” Mitsuru asked next to him.

Sakura’s eyes lit up. “So, you brought a nice-looking lady around.”

He smiled at her. “Married?”

“Uh,” he coughed out, much to Mitsuru’s humor. “She’s just my friend.”

Apparently, Sakura took his facial expression the *wrong* way. “Aren’t they supposed to be?”

Mitsuru turned to him with a growing smirk. “He wouldn’t have made it to age twenty-five if I had to deal with him every day.”

Truth be told, he was surprised Minako had let him live that long, too. “I’ll take whatever I had last time.”

“Make that two, please.”

Sakura nodded his head and turned to his newfound task, giving Akihiko enough time to wipe a hand over his face. “Look, I don’t want to sound like I’m insulting you, but-,”

She held up a hand to stop him. “I’ll have your money by the beginning of next week.”

His stomach flipped and his heart flipped and he almost flipped out of the chair. “W-What?”

“I met with my last contact today,” she said in a hushed voice. “It will take a few days to go through, but as soon as it’s available, I’ll contact you.”

The next sound he heard was the clink of the plate landing on the polished wood counter. He felt light enough that he could float out of the building without being in pain or putting his own two feet on the ground. But something collided with the back of his head, almost knocking him into his drink.

“You have better manners than this, Akihiko.”

Sakura laughed as Akihiko rubbed the back of his head. He turned to Mitsuru, who held her cup to her lips. He thought that unless she was able to summon her persona, she wouldn’t be able to do nearly as much damage as she had done years ago when he acted up. His

throbbing head begged to differ.

But before she smacked him again, he faced the barista. “Thank you, Sakura-san.”

The man paused just as he was about to walk away. “Did I ever tell you my name?”

Oh. Did he? It had been several weeks, but now that he thought about it, he was fairly sure he had learned it only from his digging into Amamiya. He figured it would be rude to lie. “I needed to speak to you about Amamiya when I came to visit the first time, which is how I learned about this place.”

Sakura sighed heavily, his hand coming to rub the back of his head. “That kid in some sort of trouble?”

He could feel Mitsuru’s eyes on him. “No. Not to my knowledge anyway.”

Akihiko felt extremely guilty when Sakura walked away and grabbed a carton of cigarettes. “First it’s someone coming in to talk about that kid. Then it’s that damn prosecutor hounding me about things that aren’t her business.”

He almost dropped his coffee. “W-Wait…a prosecutor…?”

Sae .

Sakura put a cigarette to his lips. “You know her?”

He tried to pretend that sinking feeling was just the pain kicking in since he forgot to take his medication that morning. “What was she here about?”

There must have been something off in his voice because Mitsuru suddenly interrupted. “I’ve never been a fan of coffee, but this blend is wonderful.”

Her comment seemed to work on Sakura as his scowl disappeared and he smiled at her. “I’m glad you like it.”

He wished it could have done the same to him. What in god's name would Sae be doing out in this part of town talking to Sakura? What kind of case was she working on that…?

Kaneshiro.

"Did she ask to talk to Amamiya?"

He heard Mitsuru sigh and Sakura turned his attention to him. Another frown came to his face. "How's your drink coming along?"

Minako had told him when he woke up that Sae had taken on the hunt for Kaneshiro, so maybe instead of coming to speak to him, she went after the others who had been there. But if she tried to speak to Amamiya and found out about his record, what would that mean for the kid? Sae was known to be a bit brutal with her work, but she didn't work with teenagers like he did. She probably would have scared that kid to death, and just to avoid having to speak to him?

"The coffee is great, Sakura-san, thank you."

The issue about money was taken care of, thanks to a wonderful and compassionate friend. Minako seemed to put her trust back in Makoto, so even if he was still extremely upset with her, he could trust Minako to keep an eye on their daughter. He sadly couldn't charge into Kaneshiro's business with a group of police officers and bring him into custody in the shape he was in.

But he could talk to Sae. Why did both of his daughters want to follow Amamiya around? Granted he felt he was the type of person that drew people into him, much like Minako had been back in the day, but *both* of his kids?

Akihiko took another drink. "I don't mean to pry, Sakura-san. I'm a police officer," he told him as he fished out his wallet to show him his badge. "I tend to want to find things out on my own, which is why I wanted Amamiya's story of what happened to that teacher. But… Sae shouldn't be working a case that would lead her out here without her coming to speak to me first."

Sakura's eyes widened, likely due to him already knowing who he had been talking about, but the man waved his hand, a trail of smoke following after it. "I knew I sensed something about you." He gave Mitsuru a curious look. "You his partner?"

"Just the one he runs to when he needs help," she said, turning her head to give him a hard stare. "And one that will tell him to stay out of people's business if I need to."

She was well aware that Sae was a delicate subject to talk about, but his daughter wasn't acting the way she should have. All she had wanted to do was climb up the ladder to make him feel guilty for ruining her life. But as of right now, she was doing a fine job of that on her own. If Sae had to resort to harassment to win her cases…

"I didn't catch either of your names."

Sakura gave them a once over, but after Mitsuru introduced herself, he had to shake off his dread to be able to do the same. "Akihiko Sanada."

Mitsuru bumped her knee against his when he opened his mouth to ask for more details. He swallowed hard and bit his tongue, but he knew better than to challenge her a second time.

"This is none of your business, Akihiko."

He leaned closer to her. "She's my daughter."

"Who's old enough to know what she's doing."

Minako's words ran through his mind. *You need to trust her.*

But he had been in the business long enough to recognize what he was feeling.

And he couldn't leave it alone now.

Chapter 43

Chapter 43

“She has the power, too!”

When he first arrived in Tokyo, Ren thought that he wouldn’t make but a few friends, if he was lucky. Now, his circle of “friends” kept growing and growing. He never imagined that he would meet adults Morgana swore had dormant powers. Unfortunately, he had been a little late getting up that morning and he considered himself lucky that Sanada and his lady friend hadn’t been inside Leblanc when he stumbled down the stairs. Would the older man care that he was a criminal locked in some shoddy attic space?

As strange as it had been to run into Sanada first thing in the morning, it made him happy to know he was doing well. Seemed to be doing well, anyway. It had been the first time Ren had spoken to him since before he had charged after Ryuji into Kaneshiro’s club. He wouldn’t admit it out loud, but Ren had been terrified walking into the club and finding men rolling around on the ground with various degrees of injury. But the second the *pop* of the gun reached his ears, he almost turned tail and ran back outside to call for help.

He blamed Ryuji, for his friend took off towards the noise and a rate of speed he had never witnessed before.

But it was when he realized that Sanada was still *fighting* that it sparked something in Ren. Despite an injury that looked life threatening, he kept on pushing. Despite the gun aimed at his chest, he didn’t run. He even fought the man off when the guy pressed the gun to his *head* . Ren would never tell anyone he *enjoyed* that day, or that it had been good for his heart, but since it had happened, he tried to take something positive away.

He wouldn’t run from his fears. He wouldn’t let other people intimidate him. He would fight, even when it seemed like the world was against him.

However, the lady friend of his sparked his curiosity, especially when Morgana told him he felt something about her. Who was she? The way she held herself made him think she was some kind of noble. Prim and proper. An adult version of Makoto.

Was this mysterious woman her mother? Or that other girl? Arisato seemed to know both Makoto and Sanada fairly well, but then who would this other woman be? Were they all just a big group of friends? Or was Sanada a lady's man and there was more to him than he thought?

He sighed heavily. Why was it any of his business? He may have wanted to find out some dark secret about Sanada back when he thought the cop had sent Makoto to stalk him, but he trusted the guy now. With the level of dedication he put into saving Makoto, it was hard *not* to.

His team was supposed to meet after school to make a quick trip to Mementos. Makoto had told him through a group text that she had some student council business to take care of, but then she would be free to meet up. And after spending half the day telling himself that he didn't need to stick his nose into anybody else's life, he told Makoto he would wait for her.

That wasn't unusual, right?

Once the last bell rang, he mentioned to Ann that he would stay with Makoto until she was done. His friend gave him a quick look that sent a chill up his spine, but then she waved her hand in the air and grabbed her bag.

"I can't sit and play babysitter for too long. Can I at least take Morgana with me?"

The cat immediately popped out of his bag and smiled so widely that Ren found it horrifying. "Aw, Lady Ann, I will go with you wherever you need me to!"

Ren walked her to the front door and Morgana quickly jumped from his bag to stand by her legs. His bag was suddenly so much lighter… "I'll let you know when we're heading out. I don't think this

will take too long."

Ann grinned at him, but he turned and walked back up the stairs before he became uncomfortable. Did…did *she* know about this overbearing crush he had on Makoto? Was it that obvious? Was this her silently supporting him? While he might have been the one to offer to stick around after school, he really did it because he didn't want Makoto to feel left out. And who better to take that responsibility than the team leader?

At least, that's what he liked to tell himself.

It was also a good excuse to use in case Makoto asked him why he was waiting for her when she was more than capable of walking to their hideout on her own.

Yeah. His own life had enough drama in it. He didn't need to start finding more of it in people he may or may not have been curious about.

He sent a quick message to Makoto to tell her he would wait for her in the library, but when he reached the third floor, he saw her stepping out of the student council room. He walked up to her with a grin on his face, trying to keep things *cool* .

"That eager to spend time with me?"

Her back straightened at his comment and his heart skipped a beat. She came to face him without meeting his eyes. "Oh. Um, I thought we were meeting with everyone else?"

The blush on her face was too adorable that he had no idea how he was able to form a complete sentence. "I hope we didn't cut into something important."

"No, not at all." She pulled on her bag strap and he noticed the color fading from her cheeks. He tried not to act disappointed. "The rest of the council likes to leave the first chance they get most days, so they were more than happy to have a quick meeting."

Ren put both of his hands into his pockets, his mind swimming in a thousand lines to bring back her blush, but he settled for, "Well then,

let's get going."

If Makoto had been upset about his apparent urgency to get moving, she didn't look it. She equally matched his pace. She had a neutral expression on her face. She wasn't acting like she was anything but normal.

He wanted to strike up a conversation, which was odd because he wasn't someone who took the initiative to talk first. But what the hell was he going to ask her? How her day was? What the meeting had been about? Was she worried about exams? Should they study together? Would it be weird to ask to hang out after school one day? Was she okay given everything that had happened over the past few weeks?

"I saw Sanada this morning."

Makoto came to a grinding halt, almost as if he had frozen her with his words. Her head slowly turned to him and he mentally slapped himself for even telling her. But her reaction was interesting. Had she not been in contact with Sanada? Did she not know that he was out of the hospital? *Should* he be out of the hospital?

All she replied with was a quiet, "Oh."

He didn't want to feel like he was intruding, but she seemed far too surprised for his liking. "Did…Did you not know he was out?"

Makoto shook her head. "No, he was released the other day. But…" Her eyes met his and she was clearly confused about something. "Why would he want to talk to you?"

"I don't think he went out that way just to see me," he added with a laugh. "He's been to Leblanc before. He really likes Sojiro's coffee."

Something about her expression made him uneasy. She didn't seem angry, maybe still a bit confused, but he could tell she was thinking about something. But before she could ask him a question, he tossed out, "He had a pretty lady with him, too."

She took a step back and a hand flew up to cover her mouth. "W-What?"

He found the entire thing extremely cute and humorous, but then a bolt of lightning hit him like he had been in the Metaverse and equipped a persona weak to the element.

Was Makoto so horrifically surprised because her and Sanada were…maybe… *dating?*

Was that who Makoto kept buying the chocolate for?

Was that why she was always so upset when he brought Sanada's name up?

Was that why Sanada always went out of his way to help her?

No. There was no way. Even if he didn't know Sanada's exact age, there was still quite a bit of a gap. Makoto didn't strike him as the type of person that would date someone much older than her, but… maybe? He could see why she would want to deny it in case her parents found out she was with a guy who was at least twice her age. Is that why every little thing Ren said and did to try and flirt with her went right over her head? Because she wasn't interested? Because she *had* someone already?

He tried to think of a different relationship. He didn't think the guy was her dad, despite some similar character traits. They looked nothing alike. Makoto always referred to him as "Sanada" and not "Dad". Her last name was different than his. He was also pretty sure a good father would have personally escorted his traumatized daughter to and from school with a man like Kamoshida out and about if he could. An uncle? A stepdad? Something *other* than a *boyfriend?*

Regardless, there was some level of *love* between the two of them. It hurt his heart to think about, but as much as he didn't want to know, he found himself asking anyway. "Are you dating Sanada?"

Once the question was in the air, he felt disoriented. Why did he have to say that out loud? What was going to happen if she said yes? Or what would happen if she said no and he could tell she was lying?

Makoto, however, almost tipped over where she stood. Ren actually reached out and grabbed both of her arms to keep her steady. “Are you okay?”

“You…you…” She was in a trance, so he shook her gently to see if that would snap her out of it. He tried not to think about what her reaction meant.

“Makoto.” He shook her again until some sort of life flashed in her eyes. She realized how close he was to her, then she jerked out of his hold like he was a ghost. “Are you alright?”

Her eyes closed and she took several deep breaths before she was able to face him again. “I am not dating him.”

A wave of relief flooded his system and it brought a smile to his face. “Not your type, huh?” He cringed as soon as he asked it. Where did all of his arrogance come from? He blamed her for his lack of self-control. He never used to be like this. Was this how it felt when people had a crush on someone?

However, a cold spell came over him as her eyes narrowed and focused on something beside him. “Stop it.”

He looked away, embarrassed for even asking anything to begin with. “Sorry.”

Makoto didn’t say another word to him as she started walking towards the station. He felt terrible. He had to do something to apologize to her. So he caught up to her and placed his hands back in his pockets to keep himself from touching her.

“I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“It’s fine.”

She certainly didn’t *sound* fine. “You can like whoever you like, I promise. I shouldn’t have asked-,”

“Just…stop, Ren.” He caught a flash of disgust on her face. “I’m not…I’m not *dating* him.”

His eyes turned to stare at the platform as they waited for the train. He fully intended to keep his mouth shut and stand in awkward silence, but out of the corner of his eyes, he saw Makoto huff and glare at him.

“Who was he with?”

One of his hands came up to scratch the back of his head. “Um, I’ve never seen her before.” Makoto impatiently waited for him to speak back up. “She was beautiful though. The only real thing that stood out was her hair. Dark red. She struck me as a regal and refined woman, but could murder you with a look.”

The glare was replaced with realization. “Mitsuru?”

He may not have caught the lady’s name, but he was impressed Makoto would have a name ready on her tongue. “You know her?”

She looked away towards the tracks. “Um, kind of.”

It was odd to see her so hesitant to talk when she had looked ready to kill him a minute ago. She must have felt his eyes on her, for she turned back to him a second later. “W-What?”

“You’re being pretty mysterious, don’t you think?”

Makoto sighed and pressed her hands against the front of her skirt. “N-No I’m not.”

How was that supposed to make him think otherwise? “Is she your mom?”

Again, he thought Makoto was going to fall over in her place. Thankfully, she caught herself before Ren had to react. “M-My *mom?* ”

“Uh,” he said as he ran a hand through the back of his hair. “She looks like you. And you both have this air of confidence and poise about you that makes me think so.”

Makoto was silent for the rest of the wait on the platform. He once again found himself cursing under his breath for not being able to

keep his questions to himself. This wasn't any of his business. However, they seemed to shake Makoto up quite a bit, and it worried him. He hoped she wasn't upset with him, but why else would she be so distant all the sudden? He didn't think Makoto would be *lying* to him, but she was clearly hiding something from him.

The train doors opened, but he reached out and grabbed Makoto's wrist. "I'm sorry. I don't want you to think I'm prying into your personal life. I won't ask again, okay?"

She said nothing to him. She didn't nod or shake her head to give him a non-verbal response. She didn't even make eye contact with him. It was the most uncomfortable train ride he had taken in his entire life. His brain kept shooting off conversation topics, but thankfully, his heart was able to speak louder and warned him what would happen if he spoke and upset her for a *third* time.

He was grateful that they didn't have to make another stop or a transfer. He suddenly regretted not heading to Shibuya without Makoto. She was likely going to tell him off the next time he offered to wait for her. But…he wanted to *fix* it before it ate him up and he had to give up on a chance with her all together.

There was a tug on his uniform shirt and he looked over his shoulder to find Makoto grabbing on to him. She never met his eyes, but he could tell by her facial expression that he didn't want to.

"M-My mom…" She trailed off, but he couldn't tell if she spoke under her breath and it was swept away by the crowds or if she paused. Either way, he swallowed hard and took a step closer to her.

"It's okay," he said as she dropped her hand. She took a few seconds to regain her composure. He almost pulled on her arm to get her to start walking and avoid either of them getting run over by commuters. Right as he lifted his hand, she looked right into his eyes and Ren felt the world come to a standstill around him.

"My parents are dead."

Chapter 44

Chapter 44

“My parents are dead .”

Why did she tell him that? *Why?!* Because it was what she always told people who started to ask too many questions about her life? Because he had pushed her into a corner? Because he had *disgusted* her when he thought she was *dating* her *father* and she couldn’t think straight? What had even *given* him that idea?!

Makoto knew that Mitsuru was likely going to be in and out of town for the next few weeks while she worked on collecting *her* debt. Makoto was tempted to find her and tell her she didn’t need to go through with it, that she was going to be putting a stop to Kaneshiro, but she hadn’t seen Mitsuru in *years* . But…how many other girls did her dad walk around with and seem comfortable with?

The team’s mission to Mementos did little for her stomach, her nerves, her train of thought. Morgana had even asked her if she was okay when the two of them took a seat in a fight, but she told him not to worry. It was very unlike her, but she offered to remain on the sidelines the rest of the trip, and was the first one to head home when they all had returned to the “hideout”.

She was on the train to Ebisu when she felt her phone go off in her bag. It was getting pretty late, so she worried it was her mom and she was annoyed with her. Or that it was from her dad and he was upset with her for not being home at all. But thanks to her little unsettling chat with Ren earlier, she really didn’t want to talk to him.

When she reached the station, she couldn’t ignore the burning hole in her bag any longer. She pulled her phone out and breathed a sigh of relief when it wasn’t from her father. He wasn’t a big texter anyway. She should have known better.

It was from Ren.

While he had tried apologizing several more times before, during, and right after their expedition, she still couldn't get his question out of her mind. *"Are you dating Sanada?"* Makoto thought she was going to be sick again, so to help drown out his voice in her head, she read through his short message.

I'm really sorry I offended you today. I hope this doesn't ruin our friendship. I promise I will make it up to you…if you let me.

She would never understand boys. Or maybe just Ren. Or maybe people in general.

It didn't make her feel any better when she told herself that she had *lied* to him. Didn't she get angry with her dad not that long ago about hiding behind a lie that he could easily come to terms with now? Did they need to keep their family ties a secret anymore? Sae would have thrown a fit she was sure, but it would be nice to be able to tell Ren the truth and *not* have her parents come down her throat for ruining a façade that they had held for years.

"Makoto?"

She hadn't expected anyone to call out to her since she wasn't even in the apartment building yet, but she tensed when she didn't immediately recognize the voice. She *did* , however, recognize the dark red hair and helmet that she carried under her arm.

"M-Mitsuru?" She felt foolish for half a second, but when the woman smiled at her, she stiffened and bowed her head. "Um, I-I'm sorry, Kirijo-san. I-I wasn't expecting to see you…"

She heard Mitsuru chuckle as she approached her. "It's been several years. You've grown up quite a bit since the last time I saw you."

It was harder than she thought to lift her head. "Oh. Um, yes."

"You shouldn't be so afraid of me, Makoto." Impressively, Mitsuru put a hand on her shoulder. "It's good to see you again."

And it was really nice to see her too. Mitsuru was always a ton of fun to be around when she would stop by as a child. She would bring

her candy, take her out on her motorcycle to get ice cream when her mom and dad needed “alone time”. She wondered if her fascination with riding a bike came from the few times she rode behind Mitsuru through the streets of Tokyo. She even let Makoto sit in the front when they were in an open enough space (she never got to drive, though). She always had to wear a helmet, but that may have been her favorite part. It made her feel *cool.*

It was a sort of freedom for her. She got to enjoy something without needing to hide or pretend to be someone else. Maybe that was why her persona had been a motorcycle. She was Makoto Niijima. She was Queen. She could be her own person. She was *free* .

So she returned Mitsuru’s smile with one of her own. “I’m sorry. I know you’re doing a lot on my behalf.” She suddenly felt bad for bringing it up, so before Mitsuru could comment on it, she pointed to the helmet she carried. “Do you still ride?”

Mitsuru shifted her helmet in her arms with a growing smirk. “Akihiko tells me Tokyo is not a safe place to be riding a bike. But he’ll never know, will he?”

Makoto didn’t know if she was referring to her dad never being on a bike through the crowded streets of Tokyo or if she was referring to all the times he never knew about them going out and driving around.

“I don’t mean to ask this so suddenly, but there’s something different about you.”

Hearing this, Makoto lost her smile and felt a cold hand wrap around her throat. Had her parents said something to her? She hadn’t seen Mitsuru in a long time, so how would she know she was *different?* Her mouth was dry, but when she tried to laugh it off, her voice cracked and it made Mitsuru eye her curiously.

“That young man I ran into this morning, he was with you the other afternoon.”

Her hands immediately shot up to her face. “We’re not *dating!* ” She was thankful for her hands blocking her reaction to her own

statement. She had just told Ren the same thing hours ago when he asked about…

Mitsuru sighed just when Makoto worried she was going to be sick again. “That’s not what I meant.” Makoto dared to peek through her fingers to see her deep in thought. She crossed her arms over her chest, holding her helmet in one hand, before she finally shook her head. “Forgive me. He strikes me as an interesting individual, but that feeling I had with him this morning, I’m having with you right now.”

“Oh.” What was she supposed to say? What did she even mean? Could…could she *tell* that she had special powers? Her parents had told her that Mitsuru worked for a special group of people who had “special powers”, which translated to mean Mitsuru was cool and got to ride on a bike all day long. But she wasn’t five anymore.

Would she be able to tell Mitsuru about what they were doing? It had been a while, but she trusted her. She wasn’t her dad, who would probably yell at her and tell her she was just getting into more trouble. She wasn’t her mom, who would probably worry over her again like she was a child and losing her mind. She wasn’t her sister, who would probably tell her to *grow up* , or worse, tell her to turn her friends into the police now that the Phantom Thieves were starting to gain attention.

But again, she told herself she would be betraying her team, her *friends* , if she did this behind their back. Ren had far too much to lose if she told Mitsuru the truth. Even if she trusted her, Mitsuru could accidently say something to someone else, who then would come after all of them. But…maybe she could if she left out the names? Maybe tell her only about Mementos and not about the palaces that triggered the change of heart that the public now had an interest in?

“You can talk to me, Makoto.”

She told her the truth. “I can’t. I finally found a place to belong and I’m not going to lose it. Even…even if I don’t understand what’s happening or why it’s happened to me, I-,”

“You have a persona.”

It wasn’t a question. It was a statement. And it literally knocked her off her feet. She opened her mouth to say *something* , but the harder she fought for words to come out, the more ground she lost as her mind began to falter. “How…how do you…do you *know?”*

A sense of understanding came over Mitsuru’s face, but Makoto still stood in stunned silence. Mitsuru put a hand on her shoulder and gestured her to turn around and start walking. She was too horrified by her words that she didn’t fight her, even though it was late and she needed to go up to the apartment if she didn’t want to lose that brand-new trust she built with her mother. Or anger her father any more than she probably already had.

“I’ll speak to your parents,” came Mitsuru’s voice. “I promise I won’t take much of your time.”

Strangely enough, Mitsuru didn’t hop on her bike and ask her to get on, or call her parents and tell them she was a crazy person who fought demons in a strange world and she needed to be locked away. They turned the corner to head down the street. There were a few people out and about, but one of the things she liked about Ebisu was that there weren’t *a lot* of people. It was probably why Mitsuru felt comfortable enough to have this conversation out on a street.

“I’ll start,” Mitsuru said without stopping. She walked slowly enough, but she was always cautious of who was around as she spoke. “My family has been known for disposing of Shadows and other supernatural phenomena that can’t be explained by nature or modern-day science. I’ve had to employ people in the past to help with some mild disturbances, which is how I was able to detect something from you.” Her head turned to look over at her. “I’m honestly not surprised you have this gift. But I’m also relieved that you don’t see it as a curse.”

Mitsuru continued before she could ask anything. “I have the power as well.” Makoto’s eyes widened hearing that. “It’s been years since I’ve felt my persona calling out to me like this. But I had to ask to confirm my prediction.”

“Y-You have a persona, too?!” It made Makoto feel *strange* . Mitsuru said her persona *called out* to her, and maybe that was the same feeling Makoto had now. She knew very little about these odd powers, but if Mitsuru knew more about them, her information could help the team out immensely.

But then another thought crossed her mind. “Did…do my parents have one, too?”

It was rare to see Mitsuru become flustered over an honest question, but it also gave away her answer. Knowing that, Mitsuru brushed some of her hair back over her shoulders. “It’s not my place to tell you, but as I am expecting honesty from you…yes. Your father was one of the first members of my team. We fought together for years, until he decided he wanted to focus his strength on something different and became a police officer.”

Makoto didn’t know how to feel. She was certainly surprised to hear her dad had the same kind of power she did. Was that why he was always so strong? But if he was that strong, why was he still so *afraid?*

Maybe she needed to get married and have kids to fully understand the answer to that question.

“But I would like to ask you how you go about drawing out your powers.”

They rounded another corner, but Makoto gave Mitsuru a confused look. “Don’t they all work the same?”

One of Mitsuru’s hands came to her chin. “I would have heard about the reemergence of the Dark Hour from someone.”

Dark Hour? Was that code for Mementos? Or the Metaverse? “Dark…Hour?”

“The Dark Hour was a time period where Shadows roamed the streets and humans would transform without a certain ‘gift’. It was a full, hidden hour that struck every night at midnight. And even if it has found a way to happen again, your parents would have noticed

you sneaking out of the home every day at midnight." Mitsuru sighed. "Well, perhaps not. Akihiko always managed to sneak out most nights without anyone noticing until he came back with an injury he couldn't hide."

Maybe Makoto could use that as leverage the next time she got into trouble. *Mitsuru said you were a troublemaker, too. I guess I get it from you.* However, this *Dark Hour* sounded *horrifying* . It also sounded like Mementos, but…thankfully without needing to wait for midnight. How did Mitsuru and her dad get the necessary sleep if they had to be up at midnight and then at school the next day?

"I…um, actually enter a place called the Metaverse during the day."

Mitsuru's eyes grew wide. "The Metaverse?"

She was pretty sure *she* should be the one to act so surprised because Mitsuru didn't *know* . "Is…Is that not the Dark Hour?"

Mitsuru appeared to be deep in thought, her eyebrows coming together as she tried to piece together her thoughts. But…did Mitsuru know about the Metaverse? Makoto never knew something like the Metaverse would even *exist* unless it was in a dream.

But finally, Mitsuru collected her thoughts enough to speak to her again. "I personally don't know much about it. I was aware of a specific lab that had been looking into the human psyche and had discovered a link between it and another reality, but a few years ago, the research up and vanished. Until now, I simply assumed it was a failed government experiment." She then turned to Makoto with a questioning look. "How do you get to this world if it doesn't come naturally?"

Makoto dug in her bag for her phone and pulled up the weird black and red eye app that they used to transport them. "This is the app that lets us go into the Metaverse."

Mitsuru studied the phone in her hands, then straightened her back. She still looked incredibly confused. "Tell me what you do with these powers. You enter a Metaverse? Why? And how do you call upon your powers?"

Makoto took a deep breath. “If I tell you what I know, and promise to tell you more as I learn about it, will you promise not to talk to anyone else about this?”

A smile came to the other woman’s face. “I’m not aiming to get you into trouble, or anyone else you could be working with.” Makoto’s heart skipped a beat. “I only wish to find out what’s happening. This is my field of expertise, and I do not like *not* knowing an answer. But I would like to ask something of you in return.”

Makoto nodded her head and held her breath. “Makoto, no matter how strong you become or how strong your friends are, life is not absolute. Your father has lost more in his life than you can imagine. And I’m sure your mother tells you this as well, but he cares about you. All I ask is that you don’t put yourself into a situation that you’re not prepared for. You’re intelligent enough to know your limits, so please, for your father’s sake, don’t push them beyond your capabilities.”

It was strange to hear Mitsuru’s voice so soft and quiet, but Makoto was immediately filled with guilt. Had her dad suffered to the extent Mitsuru made it sound? She didn’t peg her for a liar, nor someone who would overexaggerate, but…

“The reason he came to wield his power was because he wanted the strength to never lose someone again.” Mitsuru put a hand on her shoulder again. “He’s not very good with words, but perhaps the two of you should sit down and talk.”

She took a deep breath to fight back the burning in her eyes. “I guess I should. I’m just…scared he’s going to get so mad.”

She heard Mitsuru chuckle at her. “You just need to learn how to speak to him. He might come at you with a sharp tongue, but you give him one look,” she paused to show Makoto *the look* . “And you’ll be able to speak to him in a reasonable fashion.”

But Makoto let her head fall to her chest. “He wants me to stay his little girl. I promised him I would. But…I’m still going to have to grow up. And I don’t think he wants me to.”

“There is no greater joy to a father than watching his daughter grow up.”

Makoto lifted her head. “Huh?”

Mitsuru smiled at her. “He wants you to grow up, Makoto. He just doesn’t want to lose you because of it. He’s sadly the type that needs to be reminded from time to time that you’re not going to leave like your sister.”

Well, she could see that. She had only recently found out that her dad *had* a sister, whom she assumed had died or had a falling out at some point. Her dad had lost his friend. Her dad lost her sister, even though Makoto felt like that was more on Sae than him at this point. And for the longest time, Makoto thought he was going to lose her mom. Maybe that was why he kept those pictures hidden in his desk, to remind him of people who loved him. However, those were from the past. She was sure he would like to know that someone still loved him *now* .

They both began their walk back, but the conversation shifted back to Mitsuru’s previous inquiry about her newfound skills. “Tell me more about your persona.”

Makoto told her the events of the day she first stepped foot into Kaneshiro’s strange world. (She left out his name, the fact it was a palace, and who all was there with her.) How she felt sick when the world twisted and she was surrounded by a dreary cityscape, people as ATM machines, and a monster that resembled a walking cat. It was straight out of a Halloween movie that her sister used to sit and make her watch when she was little because it was “funny to scare her.”

She blamed Sae for all of her nightmares and the fact she was easily frightened.

She told Mitsuru about how she came to wield Johanna for the first time. Something inside her just *snapped* . She was tired of being pushed around by people who thought they could get away with it. She was tired of being afraid to stand up for herself. She was tired of other people cleaning up after her, pulling those people into danger,

and watching them suffer. So she took a stand and she felt the power. She heard the voice in her head as clear as day. It was powerful, much too powerful for her body to take, and she thought it was going to crush her.

But then she called out for her persona and suddenly, she was *free* . She felt like she could have done anything. She had no idea what to do, how to harness her power, but it all came so naturally to her. Like Johanna had been by her side her entire life. It was a wonderful feeling, even if she didn't realize how much energy she had lost until they returned back to the station.

"Interesting," came Mitsuru's whisper once Makoto wrapped up her story. "You don't need to put stress on your body to call her? She comes naturally?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Well, I only grab my mask and call for her and she's there."

The other woman hummed in amusement. "And you enter this world with your phone?"

Makoto nodded her head. "I have no idea how anyone initially got the app on their phone, but once I entered, it was downloaded onto mine."

Something flashed in Mitsuru's eyes. "You can go whenever you like?"

Oh. "I-I mean…I guess?"

"Would you be willing to take me sometime?"

Would that be okay? Would Ren find out she was sneaking into a palace or Mementos on her own? "Um, I-I don't see why not…?"

Another smile came to her face. "I only wish to see this world for myself. It can be a simple enter and leave mission. Unless that's not possible."

"That should be…okay…" She felt slightly uncomfortable since she wasn't the leader, knew very little about the Metaverse, but Mitsuru

did tell her she had a persona too. That would be really cool to see. “Would you be willing to show me your persona?”

The air between the two of them became much more relaxed and comforting again. “As long as you don’t tell your father.”

Makoto held a hand to her mouth to stifle her laughter. “I won’t.”

There was a friendly, but intimidating glare in Mitsuru’s eyes. “Good. Because I’m sure you’ve heard about what happens to those who disobey me, yes?” When Makoto stood still and shook her head, the older woman smirked and brushed her hair behind her shoulder.

“They didn’t refer to me as the “Executioner” for no reason. I would hope you would rather not find out the hard way.”

Makoto made a mental note never to anger Mitsuru from then on.

Chapter 45

Chapter 45

Makoto got to experience first-hand *the look* that Mitsuru had shown her only a few minutes ago when they both walked into the living room.

“Where the hell have you been, Makoto?”

Mitsuru stood beside her and shot an ice-cold glare to her father, but it didn’t work like Makoto had thought it would. “I told you she was with me.”

Her dad drew his shoulders back and exhaled deeply, but his tone was much less hostile than it had been before. “Where were the *both* of you, then?”

Makoto felt something heavy on her shoulder. A hand. “We had a nice little chat.”

He glanced at her, then to Mitsuru, then back to her again. “It’s late. You shouldn’t have been out.”

Then, a light shove almost knocked her off her feet. She turned to Mitsuru, who gave her a weak smile and a nod. “I need to get going.” Her gaze fell back onto her father. “I’ll be in touch.”

The moment Mitsuru was gone, Makoto felt the walls begin to close in around her. This would technically be the first time she had spoken to her father since she had visited him in the hospital shortly after he woke up. In her mind, it seemed the most simple thing in the world, talking to a man she had loved and respected her entire life. But she stood in the middle of the room, her head lowered, her hands clasped together in front of her, speechless.

She only looked up when she heard him groan. “I want to trust you, Makoto, but how the hell am I supposed to know you’re staying out of trouble when I find out from a group of kids that you charged

head-first into a criminal's hideout?! Do you know he sent those men to try and *kill* me?! What is *wrong* with you?"

While his words were sharp enough to cause damage to her heart, he had been fairly quiet about it. Maybe he was tired. Had he taken his medication? "Where's Mom?"

Instead of answering her, he dropped his head into his hands. He was silent for a few minutes, but just when Makoto found the courage to take a step towards him, he pushed himself up off the couch. He favored his left leg as he used the arm of the couch to keep his balance. He didn't look to her when he spoke again.

"It's late. You should go to bed."

She watched him painfully as he limped halfway across the room before he winced in pain and fell against a wall. Makoto wiped at her eyes, then rushed over to offer him some support. She lifted his arm, but he quickly yanked it out of her grip. Her heart sank in her chest.

"Go to bed. I'll be fine."

But she would not let him feel like this. She wanted to be strong, to make both of her parents proud of who she was becoming, not falter and cry like the child she used to be. So, she grabbed his arm again, kept a firm grip on him, and turned around to walk back into the living room. He fought against her, but in the shape he was in, she was easily able to lead him to the couch.

"I'm sorry that I got you hurt," she started the second he was sitting again. It was hard when his eyes met hers, but she wouldn't *cower* . She was better than this. She *had* to be better than this. "I am. I wish you knew how hard all of this has been for me."

"You sure as hell don't *act* like it."

She tried to ignore the sting behind her eyes. "I'm grateful that you came. You saved me. And it was hard to see you in a hospital bed." One of her hands ran over her face, wiping away a few stray tears and telling herself to *stand up straight!* "I thought you were dead. I thought I was never going to tell you how sorry I was for my actions.

But…but you kept *fighting* .”

“And *you* keep disobeying us.” His hands ran through his hair in frustration. “I would give my life for you, for your sister, for your mother, but when I find out that *you* ran off into this level of trouble…”

It was too hard to keep standing, so she took a seat beside him, keeping a small gap between them. “You need to understand that you’re not going to lose me.”

She felt proud for the fact she sounded as confident as she wanted to, but then her dad turned to her with a glare that killed it. “If I had been another minute late, Makoto, you would have been shipped off to *god* knows where and that’s exactly what would have happened! How can you not *see* that?!”

Makoto took a deep breath, then another. “I need you to trust me.”

His reply was immediate. “ *Trust* you?!”

Stay strong . “I know I acted foolishly in the past, and you have every right to be angry with me. But just like you, I want to fight through my fears. I want to grow stronger so you don’t have to fight my battles anymore. I want to grow smarter so you don’t have to worry about me like this.” Her hands came together on her lap.

She inhaled deeply, then said, “I don’t want to just be your little girl, Dad.” She stumbled over her words when she noticed he was holding his head like he was in pain. “I-I…A little girl will always be *little* . Weak and afraid and ignorant of the world around her. So…I want to be your *daughter* , someone you can trust to take care of herself, come to you for help, and never doubt that she loves you, no matter how far apart you are.”

She didn’t really know if her words had done anything. It all sounded wonderful in her head, but her dad wasn’t doing much to clue her in on what to do next. She worried that maybe her mom was right and he needed time to be angry, but he would be too strict on her when she was doing some *good* . She needed to be able to reach him, just like she had her mother, although ten times harder.

But she loved him. And she knew he loved her, too. Things might be tense for a few days, but she was sure he would forgive her.

However, several minutes later without a word or reaction from her dad, she decided it was best to just call it a day. It had been one hell of an afternoon, and even though her mind was racing, her body was eager to get some much-needed rest. She stood from the couch, but any other remarks she wanted to make got caught in the back of her throat.

Makoto managed to take one step before his hand wrapped around her wrist. She turned back to him in surprise, maybe a little nervous to know what he was going to say to her, but he didn't hold on to her for long. She thought that he was struggling to come up with something to say to her, but he couldn't find the right words. So, hoping to ease his burden, she wished him a goodnight instead.

"Makoto, wait." She didn't know if her heart could take whatever he planned to say to her. Was he angry still, or upset, or spiraling back into a depression? "Do you have any idea what you're asking me to do?"

"Um…" Her eyes bore holes into the floor in front of her feet. "I…I don't…"

"You want me to trust you after everything that's happened in these past few months?"

Oh. She didn't think that would have been too hard to ask of him. "Oh…well, yes, I do."

There was a look on his face that made her stomach turn into knots. "First, you hide details about Kamoshida, then you start following Amamiya around with no justifiable reason, then you take it upon yourself to meet with Kaneshiro? Why the hell would I trust you?"

"Because I'm your *daughter* ." Her hands balled up by her side. "And I know that you're only angry because you think I'm going to be another tally mark in your list of people you've *lost* ." She was brave enough to look up. "But you're not going to lose me. I promise."

He threw his head back into the couch. “It’s because you’re my daughter that I worry like this.” He appeared to be calming down. His face relaxed into something more neutral and his tone lost most of the anger. If she were to be honest with herself, she didn’t know which emotion she would rather see: his terrifying rage or his heartbreaking sorrow.

She came to sit next to him again regardless. “Dad, I appreciate that you worry about me. But I don’t want you to. Too much…I know you never *won’t* worry about me…”

Her dad took a deep breath, exhaled, then turned his head to look at her. “If you really want to keep me from seeing your name on that list of people I’ve lost in my life, promise me that you’ll stay out of trouble. Please.”

Both of her arms wrapped around his neck and she pressed her face into his shoulder. She only nodded in response, unable to speak with the lump in her throat, but she knew he understood when she felt his arms around her back.

“You have to earn my trust again, Makoto, but…” He held her tightly. “I’ll try to keep in mind that you’re able to make your own decisions now.”

“You won’t lose me, Dad.” She lifted a hand to rub her face. “So when you get better, you’re going to have to train me again so I can be stronger than you.”

A smile came to her face when she felt him chuckle under her. “The only day you’ll be able to say that is when I’m dead.”

“Looks like I’m never going to be able to say it then.”

He finally pushed her back, but then he grabbed her chin and forced her to look at him. “Promise me you’ll stay out of trouble, or you’ll at least come talk to me first.”

“I-I promise.”

He sighed heavily, suddenly looking more tired than she *felt* . “So, what did you and Mitsuru talk about?”

While she was pleased that some of the weight had been lifted off her chest, she wasn't sure she wanted to start another conversation, especially one where she couldn't be truthful. "She said you snuck out of the dorm a lot and that you should stop giving me so much grief."

She cracked a smile when he frowned. "What?"

"She said you were quite the troublemaker." She playfully elbowed him in the side. "I must get it from you then."

His frown only deepened. "Alright, never mind. Go get ready for bed."

He pushed her away from him and Makoto jumped off the couch. She was halfway to the hall when she stopped and came back around to look at him. "Dad?" She waited until he met her eyes. "I know I have a long way to go, but I want you to know that…I will protect you."

She felt silly for saying it out loud, but the look on her father's face was anything but silly. She worried for a moment that he was going to stand up and yell at her or chide her for being foolish. However, when he did come to his feet again, she walked over to him to help support him. She noticed that he was leaning on her more than she expected, likely tired from the day and spending so much energy on their conversation.

He finally spoke when he got her to stop outside of her room. "Thank you, Makoto."

It was her fault anyway for getting him hurt at all, so she thought helping him was the least she could do. But instead of releasing her, he pulled her into his chest more forcibly than she was ready for. "Sometimes I forget how strong you can be. I've wanted you to stay a small and defenseless child that I could always protect. Yet here you are, wanting to protect *me* ."

She leaned against him, but not too much to knock him over. "I want to be like you. I want to protect the people I care about. But I know I'm still growing, so I want you to help me, and for Mom to help me,

and Sis, and my friends."

He stiffened slightly when she mentioned her sister, but she thought little of it. She lightly pushed off of him and offered a smile. "I want you to watch me grow until you can tell me that you're proud of me."

She felt the heat rising to her cheeks when her dad smiled at her. "It must have taken a lot of heart and courage to talk to me like this, and I respect that. But what I don't tell you enough is that I *am* proud of you. I might not like it when you do something stupid, but I can tell you're learning from it. And if anything, you've taken this last turn of events and become far stronger because of it."

"It must be because you're my dad," she said, her head still tilted to the ground to hide her blush. "Everyone says that despite the events in your life, you got stronger and smarter too."

His sigh knocked her off balance for a second. "Is that what Mitsuru talked to you about?"

"Mom has told me, too," she replied honestly. "So I'm going to follow your example and keep fighting just like you do."

His expression softened, but there was a sad smile on his face. "I don't want you to know what it's like to lose anyone."

Makoto straightened her back and lifted her head to look him dead in the eye. "Then I will become strong enough to make sure I don't."

And she would do everything she could to prove that.

Chapter 46

Chapter 46

“You spoke to your daughter last night.”

“I did.” Minako reached over to brush her fingers through Akihiko’s hair. “I found out you and Mitsuru both talk about me behind my back.”

She giggled into his shoulder. “I promise I only tell Makoto the good things.”

Akihiko twisted his chest so he could face her. “She’s changed.”

Her hand came to rest on the side of his face as she smiled at him. “She has.”

It was quite apparent now that something had sparked a growth in their daughter, but Minako still couldn’t figure out *what* . She kept leaning on the boyfriend idea, but she knew she wouldn’t get a straight answer from Makoto. She sure as hell wasn’t going to voice her thought to Akihiko in case he took it the wrong way and asked Makoto and then Makoto wouldn’t keep her updated on any “progress.”

“I *felt* something, Minako.” She lifted her eyes to look into his. “I don’t know how to describe it, but…it was weird. I’ve never felt like that with her before.”

Minako pushed herself up on the bed and sat beside him. She put a hand to his chest when he started to move to do the same. “You need to keep your leg where it is if you don’t want to irritate it. Besides,” she added with a smirk, her eyes taking in the sight of his exposed upper body. “I like the view.”

He was quick to throw a hand to his face while she laughed next to him. “You’re going to kill me one day, you know.”

She leaned in to kiss the back of his hand, then straightened her back. “Tell me about this feeling you had.”

“I don’t know how to describe it.”

“Try to,” she replied, grabbing his wrist and pulling his hand off his face. “I keep trying to come up with a reason as to why she’s had this change, and I’m always coming up empty. Maybe whatever you’re feeling will explain how I’m feeling.”

Akihiko used his hands to push himself back on the bed and Minako helped him to sit up against the wall. He kept his eyes cast downward when he spoke to her. “I’ve felt this way once before, back when I was on suspension and met up with Sakamoto and Amamiya. I felt it with both of them, too. It was strange, but I didn’t think anything of it.”

He scratched the side of his head, then added, “I felt something stirring in me when I met with them. And…I think it was Caesar trying to call out to me.”

Hearing him name off his *persona* had *not* been anything she thought he would say. “What?”

“I know it sounds crazy, but that’s the only way I can describe it.”

But…what did any of that mean? She had long since lost her ability to talk to her personas, speak to Theo or Igor, so she really *didn’t* know what he was feeling. “Can you even summon him?”

He leaned his head back against the wall. “I have no idea. It’s been years. But, I think if I really wanted to, I could.” He then gave her a concerned look. “Can you talk to any of yours?”

“I lost that ability when I woke up from my coma, remember?”

When he flinched at her comment, she reached for the hand laying by his side. “Honey, it’s okay. I just don’t know how it feels, being able to connect on some level with that force anymore.”

“I didn’t mean to bring it up.”

She playfully slapped his shoulder. “I think it would be neat, calling on him in a fight or something.”

“But what does this have to do with Makoto?” He sighed. “He’s been dormant for so long, so why would he try and make himself known now?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “Maybe Makoto has a persona?”

Akihiko stiffened next to her, but she hadn’t meant for him to take her seriously. However, she could see his mind working to process the thought, and it suddenly got her to think about it as well.

Minako would never forget the night she called upon her persona for the first time. It was a horrifying night, and even more horrifying holding a *gun* to the side of her head in hopes that it would save her friend. But it took her several days to recover from it, so she assumed that was the case for everyone.

She had learned back then that Mitsuru did not need but a few minutes to recover.

She had learned back then that Akihiko did not need but a few minutes to recover.

The same was true for Yukari, Junpei, *everyone* . But she learned that she had a unique power, and Yukari had actually told her that she had summoned *two* different personas, and one of them would forever scar her in her nightmares.

But then they fought Death, or Nyx, or *Ryoji* , and she woke up almost a year later with *nothing* . There was no buzzing feeling in her chest that she would oftentimes feel when she was tired or irritable. There was no warm sense of comfort from her inner spiritual powers that helped her relax when she realized Akihiko had taken off to the other end of the world before she could wake up.

She was a shell. No powers. No memories of what had happened after the fight. No emotions. Had it not been for Yukari and Junpei offering to help her get back up on her feet, she probably would have given up on her life.

But to think that her own *daughter* would have the ability she had lost made her cringe. What would that mean for her future? Could she call upon several powers, or was she like her father and could only call upon the one? How was it even possible that Makoto would have one at all? Was she going to have to fight some demonic force that threatened to wipe out humanity?

“Minako?”

She snapped to attention when Akihiko put a hand on her wrist. “Oh, sorry…”

“Are you okay?”

When was the last time either one of them had talked about wielding a persona? “I’m alright. It’s hard to think about, maybe…”

There was a worrying expression on his face. “I didn’t mean to bring any of this up again.”

She shook her head. “I’m more trying to explain how Makoto would even have this kind of power to begin with…if she did, which, I doubt she does.”

She could feel Akihiko’s grip tightening on her wrist. “What if she does?”

“Do you really believe she would be able to keep it from us?” She gave him a smile. “Aki, Makoto would likely freak out if she saw something like Caesar or Thanatos. That and we would have noticed her sneaking out so late at night. And I’m sure Mitsuru would have told you at least about the Dark Hour being a thing again.”

“Still,” he said quietly. He then shook his head. “No, never mind. You’re right. Makoto wouldn’t be able to hide something like this.”

Minako didn’t tell him that her main thought had been that Makoto had a *boyfriend* . A good one. She was a lot like her dad, shy around people, especially someone they both liked, but there had been a similar change in Akihiko when Minako had finally confronted him on the rooftop in high school. He was still awkward for several weeks after, but a relationship was new to him. He had to learn what he

was doing. Minako could easily see it happening to Makoto as well. So she decided to keep it to herself until their daughter felt more comfortable addressing it to them.

“I should probably go start making breakfast for our daughter.” Akihiko sighed heavily beside her, so she sat up on her knees and lifted one of her legs to rest on the other side of him. All doubt and confusion was wiped from his face when she placed both of her hands on his shoulders and rested her forehead against his. “So you get some more rest and I’ll bring you something, okay?”

When she tried to move off the bed, his hands grabbed her by the waist and kept her locked in her position over him. “I love you, and I will never leave you again. I promise.”

His words were like a knife to her heart. Sure she had been extremely upset years ago when she had woken from her year nap and he wasn’t there. Sure she had been extremely pissed at him when she saw him almost two years later. But she had scared him, too. He thought she was *dead* . Just like everyone else he had ever loved in his life.

He had promised her that same night she let him back into her heart that he would never leave her or do anything to hurt her again.

She promised him that she would never bring up or talk about what had happened to keep both of them sane.

He was always the one who kept his promises. She always failed. “Aki, I know you’re not leaving. Ever. Because I wouldn’t let you go anyway. So let’s just wait until Makoto can tell us herself and just support her from the sides. Okay?”

She leaned in to kiss him, to let her love for him heal the wound she had opened up, then left her lips lingering over his. “I love you, Aki. Don’t ever forget that.”

She felt rather than saw his smile, then she rotated herself to stand beside him as she got off the bed. “I’ll bring you something to eat and you’ll take your medication and *rest* today.” She gave him a sharp look. “Understand?”

He turned his head so he wasn't looking at her. "Yes."

Even though she had been half tempted to ask Makoto about the possibility of having a persona, she chose to keep quiet about it. She saw her daughter out the door, brought breakfast to Akihiko, then let him get his rest.

"I have some things to go out and do today, so promise me you'll stay in bed and rest."

He smiled at her. "I promise."

Minako almost called him halfway through the day just to make sure he was okay, that he was still at home, that he hadn't gotten up and hurt himself. But she fought the urge by telling herself that if he was asleep, her phone call would wake him up. If, of course, he heard his phone at all.

So she made her last stop in Shibuya as the sun began to set behind the buildings. She went there for a purpose. She had sent a message to Makoto earlier asking her to head home after school to watch over her father, and she surprisingly said she would. She ignored her daughter's extra message asking her where *she* was going to be, because if Makoto knew what she was up to, she may let it slip to her father.

Minako stepped into the beef bowl shop and took a seat at the closest available stool at the counter. She had never been inside the place, but she knew Akihiko had been there several times. It had been years since she had even had the dish unless she failed making it herself, so she was determined to figure out what she had been missing by doing her own personal research so she could hopefully surprise Akihiko.

She also wanted to ask for a recipe. While she had easily been able to look it up online before, there was always something *missing* . Her tongue couldn't taste the difference, but she knew Akihiko well enough to know when he wasn't a fan of something she made. Given that beef bowl was his life source, she *had* to perfect it. And what better place to go and ask than a shop that knew it all too well?

“Arisato-san?”

She heard her name and glanced up. She couldn’t believe what she was seeing. “Amamiya?”

Well her day just got that much more exciting. Given her talk about Makoto that morning, she was very eager to try and solicit information from the boy who *might* have been secretly dating her daughter. She had to remind herself that he didn’t know they were related, unless he did. He might have. He sure acted like he knew something that day he brought Makoto to the hospital.

The young man before her gave her a kind smile. “I mean no disrespect, but I wouldn’t have pegged you for a fan of beef bowl.”

She really liked him. He was polite, carried himself with confidence, and he treated people with respect. Whatever that migraine had been about when she first met him still bothered her, but it couldn’t have been a *bad* thing. “If you can keep a secret, I’m not. I’m just in a desperate need to know how to make it myself.”

A customer behind him called out for him, so she nodded to him and he walked off to speak to the man. When he came back a few minutes later, he bowed to her. “I’m sorry. I never asked you what you wanted.”

Are you dating my daughter? “I’ll have the classic, or, whatever you recommend.”

Amamiya was in and out of conversations with her, but she watched him work. He spoke to each person kindly. He treated each of them with respect. He took his job very seriously for a high school kid who was likely just looking for money to spend on movies and snacks. Maybe a nice dinner with a girl. She couldn’t help the smile that came to her face. Makoto would be very happy with him.

But after an hour or so, the shop cleared out until it was just her and one other lone man sitting down the counter. Amamiya wiped his hands on a nearby dish towel and approached her. “How did you like your dinner?”

“It was great, actually,” she said with a smile. “I still don’t quite know what the difference is between my beef bowl and this place, though.”

Amamiya also had a nice smile. “Maybe because I was the one who served it.”

That got her to laugh. *And he’s funny?* “You’re actually kind of cute, you know that?”

Instead of blushing at her comment, his smile turned more into a cocky grin. “Well, thank you.” He leaned up against the counter that intersected the spot by her seat. “I won’t tell your boyfriend.”

She chuckled at him. “You assume I have a boyfriend?”

“A pretty lady like yourself shouldn’t be single.”

Smooth. Even if she began to wonder if he was leading the conversation into a question he wanted to ask her, but wouldn’t. “And if I am?”

His smirk faltered for a moment, but he was quick and smart enough to cover it up with a quiet laugh. “Then I owe Ryuji five hundred yen.”

She waved her hand in front of her while her eyes studied his reaction. “I’m married.”

He appeared to be startled by her confession. When he turned his head to look at her, she could see the confusion in his eyes. “I don’t mean to be nosy or anything, but you don’t wear a wedding ring.”

He had noticed before. She was sure of it. His eyes never once dropped to her hands since she had been speaking with him. Would he have looked back at the hospital? But why would he have cared then? “Why would I need to wear it? To keep prying little boys like you from asking if I’m single or not?”

She had to bite back a laugh when he looked away, embarrassed. “Sorry.” He rubbed the back of his head before he put his hands into his pockets. “How do you know Sanada?”

It hadn't been a question she had been expecting, nor was it a question she was prepared to answer. Is that what he had wanted to ask a moment ago? Did he already assume that she had a relationship with Akihiko? Minako knew she couldn't come right out and tell him the truth, but if she said they were 'dating' or 'seeing each other,' she would now need to joke about being *married.*

She left him with the basics. "I knew him in high school. He had a history of getting into trouble. He tends to stick his nose into places where it doesn't belong."

A more neutral expression came to Amamiya's face. "He's quite impressive, though." Minako waited for him to continue. "The way he kept fighting when he was hurt was probably the most motivating thing I've seen in my life."

Something twisted in her gut. She didn't know if she *wanted* to know what had gone down in the club. Even if Amamiya took something away from his horrifying experience, it still could have cost Akihiko his life. Or Makoto's.

"You should tell him that."

The corners of his lips turned upwards. "He frequents the coffee shop I work at sometimes."

She chuckled into her hand and took the chance to flip the tables. "Well aren't *you* just a jack of all trades." She then leaned into her open palm. "So tell me, do *you* have a girlfriend?"

Without knowing her relationship to Makoto, she was positive Amamiya would have been open with her. However, he hung his head and shook it. "Sadly, I don't think she's interested."

Oh, he *had* to be talking about Makoto. Hopefully. Makoto seemed interested, just unable to voice it properly. She was her father's daughter after all. However, Minako didn't want to push him to talk to her thinking it *was* Makoto and then find out he had been referring to someone else. "What, with all your charm and good looks, you can't catch a girl?"

He crossed his arms over his chest. “A lot of people don’t like me. They think I’m too quiet and nerdy. I usually prefer the company of books to the company of people.”

“That I don’t believe,” she interrupted.

The smile came back to his face. “It’s weird being this open with someone I don’t really know. But…it’s kind of nice.”

That feeling from the first time they met came back into her heart. “Are you sure we’ve never met before? I feel like I know you, but yet, I’ve never met you at the same time.”

He stared ahead of him with a blank look. “I hear a ringing from time to time, but…I would have no idea why it only happens around you. I’m positive I would have remembered you had we met before.”

Amamiya walked away to talk to the only other customer right as her phone went off in her bag. It was a call, which meant it was more likely from Akihiko than Makoto, and she sighed when she saw that was exactly who was calling her.

She painfully chose to ignore it when Amamiya sauntered back to his spot across from her. “Your husband?”

A smirk played on her lips. “You have good eyes then.”

The phone buzzed in her hand and she slid the new text open. *Where are you?*

It was getting late, and she didn’t need to worry him anymore than she already had. “Well, Amamiya, thank you for the conversation, but my husband must sense I’m speaking to another man and would like me to come home.”

The boy chuckled at her. “You should tell him you’re a grown woman and you can do whatever you want.”

She laughed. “Don’t tell him that or it will be the last thing you say.”

“It was nice to talk to you, Arisato-san.”

She paid for her bill and stood up. “I would prefer it if you call me Minako.”

He bowed to her. “Then I would prefer you call me Ren.”

“Okay, *Ren* ,” she said as she lifted her bag around her shoulder. “Do you mind telling me what all goes into your beef bowl?”

He nodded his head and disappeared back into the kitchen. Yeah, she *really* hoped that Makoto could have a chance with this young man. He was perfect. He was kind, friendly, *cute* , playful, a dash of daring and cocky, everything that Makoto would need in her life.

He held out a piece of paper when he came back into view. “I hope this solves your problem. Just don’t think you can open your own beef bowl shop with it.”

“I appreciate it.” She smiled at him and placed the paper into her bag. “Oh, one last thing, Ren.” Minako waited until he made eye contact with her. “Don’t take your time for granted. Sometimes people need to have things spelt out for them or they’ll never understand.”

Ren cracked a smile. “You speaking from experience?”

She turned and waved a goodbye. “I wouldn’t be married if I waited for him to make the first move.”

Chapter 47

Chapter 47

Ren sat at his desk staring off into space for several minutes. He had just returned back to his room after his shift at the beef bowl shop. And his bizarre, yet interesting encounter with Minako.

Where had he *met* her before?

It was going to drive him nuts. Morgana told him a few times that he sensed nothing from her. She wasn't a special person like Sanada or the other girl he had been with. A normal human, but he never had a normal feeling around her. His ears were always ringing. His heart beat a little too fast for his liking. All the while, he was always *calm.*

Maybe that was how it felt to have a close connection with a mother.

However, his earlier theory about her being Makoto's mother went out the window the longer he talked to her. Minako was very open and had a bright and playful spirit. Even in the Metaverse, Makoto wasn't quite like that. She may have been more *open* , but she was more aggressive, in a good way. (In a super sexy way.)

So he was back to square one. All three of them had to have known each other, which Minako did say she knew Sanada from high school. Somewhere along the way, they both met Makoto? Did they know her parents before they had…

He still felt terrible for forcing Makoto to tell him her parents were dead. He wasn't a big fan of his parents, but he took a few days to write out his feelings so he could voice them when he would be able to call them again. They were *alive* , and because of that, he could make some sort of peace with them in the future. But ever since Makoto told him that, she had been much more reserved around him. Every time he tried to apologize for it, she shook her head, told him it was okay, and left him staring after her.

It was all too much for his mind to take, so he decided that he would go across the street to the bathhouse to relax. He needed his mind to stop creating new ideas, twisting old ones, and leaving him spinning in circles with no real motive. If he was meant to figure out who Minako was, it would come to him. If Makoto was going to forgive him fully, she would. Everything would be okay.

It was always so much harder to see through than to think.

As much as the hot spring had helped clean his skin, it did little to clear his mind. He fell onto his bed with a groan and Morgana was quick to jump into the space beside him. “You okay?”

His fingers weaved through his hair. “Not really.” The cat’s tail wagged in the air as he patiently waited for Ren to speak back up. “I just think too much is all.”

Morgana’s front paws landed squarely on his chest. “What are you thinking about?”

As much as he wanted to talk to *someone* about it, he worried voicing his consuming trail of thoughts would only cause frustrations and judgments he didn’t want. “It’s nothing.”

“You’ve been kinda mopey for a few days now.”

Was he? He tried to keep his restlessness from showing so he wouldn’t bother anyone else. Everyone seemed to be focused in the palace, and he was sure the others were focusing on school now that Makoto had joined the team. But when Morgana urged him to speak by pushing on his chest, Ren took a deep breath.

“I’m worried about what’s going to happen with Kaneshiro. What if we don’t make it in time? What’s going to happen to Makoto, to Ryuji, to their cop friend? What’s going to happen to me?”

It was something that popped up constantly in his nightmares. Makoto would not show up for school and he would find out from someone that she had left to go pay off her debt. Ryuji would get kicked out of school. One of Kaneshiro’s men would go kill Sanada and his family, if he had one. Ren would get kicked out of school

and out of his “home” and right back into a jail cell…

“Don’t worry, Ren! We’re making good progress, even with a new member!” Morgana hopped onto his stomach, causing Ren to meet the deep blue eyes of his friend. “Makoto is a fantastic addition. She’s really strong and really smart, so I think with her power and our experience, we’re going to be just fine!”

His positivity was helpful to some degree. He knew their deadline was closing in on them, but Morgana told them that they were fairly close to the treasure. If they all put their strengths together, they could make it to the end in a day, maybe two. They could take it slow and make it in three.

Ren nodded his head and turned to look out the window. It was late. He was tired. He was *mentally* tired. All he wanted was a full day of solid sleep without being bombarded by the *what ifs* .

“Something else on your mind?”

Sometimes he wondered if Morgana *was* human at one point and knew human emotions better than *he* did. “I’m worried I offended Makoto the other day. She’s been pretty quiet around me and hasn’t spoken to me much outside of when she *has* to.”

He could have sworn he heard Morgana chuckle. “Sounds like you’re missing all of her attention.”

Ren did his best to contain his blush. “Well, not really. She just…told me something the other day and I feel like she’s upset at me for it.”

The cat laying on his chest gave him a look. “Oh?”

But what should he say? He didn’t want to tell Morgana and have that violate more of her trust she placed in him, if there was any left at this point. He couldn’t lie to him and make up some story in case that came back to haunt him.

“I asked her if she was dating Sanada and she got really upset with me. Then I asked her if that lady we met with him had been her mother, because I thought they looked and acted a lot alike.”

Morgana sat on his hind legs with a frown. “To be honest, I thought they could have been dating, too. Which is why I thought you were upset. Because I think you like her.”

His exhale sounded more like a groan and it caused Morgana to smirk at him. “Okay fine. I *might* have a small crush on her, but she’s been through a lot. I don’t really know the first thing about her. And while you and everyone else can say I’m charming and I know what to say in every situation, I don’t. I don’t know how to tell her I’m sorry for jumping into her personal life.”

“Why can’t you just say that?”

He sighed again. “You make it sound so easy.”

Morgana pawed at his shoulder. “It *is* easy, Ren.”

It *should* be easy, but he was becoming nervous around Makoto. He had read on his phone that it was typical to feel as much around someone they liked. But he had been so flirty with her until she had started following him around Shibuya. Now that he was watching her fight through the palace and Mementos, he realized his *crush* wasn’t a crush anymore.

He really liked her. She was strong. She spoke with conviction, knowing she had the strength to back up her words. She fought through her fear of Kaneshiro’s blackmail like there wasn’t anything looming over her head. She held her head much higher in school, reached out to help people who he couldn’t tell even needed help, had an adorable blush on her face when he caught her staring at him down the hall…

“My parents are dead.”

Things hadn’t been the same between them since. “I’ll try and talk to her tomorrow after school.”

He was thankful that his alarm woke him up before he finished a nightmare where a purple-skinned and yellow-eyed Kaneshiro laughed as he wrapped his arm around a terrified, but obedient, Makoto…

Ren walked down the stairs, trying to rub some sleep from his eyes, but he was surprised to find someone else was in the store.

“I said, I have nothing to tell you.”

Sojiro may have sounded harsh to his customers, but those who were regulars knew it was just how he spoke. However, the tone in his voice with the woman sitting at the bar was *not* his usual tone.

Ren thought it would be best to ignore whatever was happening, but the woman turned to him as he made his way to the door. His breath caught in his throat when he noticed her *eyes* , but he placed his hands in his pockets and tried to tell himself he wasn’t scared of her.

“Your uniform,” she said to him, much calmer than he expected her to. His eyes met hers again, but there was a sense of amusement on her face. “You go to Shujin, yes?”

Sojiro slammed his hand on the counter, making Ren jump slightly in his spot. “You leave him alone!”

His heart swelled with pride for a moment. Was Sojiro finally warming up to him? Who was this woman anyway? He watched her fish out a wallet to pay for the drink sitting in front of her, then she grabbed her bag and threw it over her shoulder.

“Someone I know attends school there.” The woman smiled softly at him, then she turned to Sojiro again. “I’ll be back to speak to you again in the near future. I hope you change your mind before then.”

The next second, she was gone. Sojiro waved his paper at her, as if to ward off the evil spirit she had left behind. “Gah, that woman!”

It was also odd that Sojiro would dislike a female customer. Ren may not have known his past, but he had overheard a few customers making jokes about how Sojiro was a bit of a womanizer in his day. Maybe Ren should ask him for help then?

Before Ren could even turn and ask the older man who she was, Sojiro pointed a finger towards him. “You stay out of trouble, you hear? That woman is the devil. Don’t say anything to her.”

Strange. He could have sworn she had the same kind of eyes Makoto had. If she was related to her, then she couldn't be a *bad* person.

However, he wouldn't ask Makoto about the woman, that's for sure. He would hate for her to tell him that she had lost a sister or a cousin or an aunt or whoever she could have been. If he was meant to find out, he would. In time, maybe.

He was a little hesitant to head up to the student council room after class that day. Ryuji had asked him in a text after lunch if they were headed to the palace, but Ren knew the longer he let the silence fester between him and Makoto, the less likely he would actually speak to her. He answered Ryuji's question with a simple *I don't know yet* , just in case something backfired in his face.

Everything started out well when he turned the corner to head down the hall and Makoto came out of the room. Morgana wished him a quiet, "Good luck" before he disappeared into his bag. When he was close enough to her, Makoto looked over at him and the surprise was immediate.

"R-Ren? What are you doing here?"

A lump of dread formed in his throat, but he coughed to clear the air. "I was hoping I could talk to you, if you have the time."

Her eyes darted around the hall, looking for some sort of escape. His heart fell into his stomach. "Um…"

"No, it's okay." He held up a hand as a form of apology. "I don't want to keep you." He bowed lightly to her, trying to keep the rejection from showing on his face.

"W-Wait…"

He had made it maybe two steps before her voice reached him. He turned to her quickly, hoping that he didn't make it known how excited he was that *maybe* she would hear him out. "Yeah?"

Her gaze fell to the floor by her feet and he felt a pressure building in his chest. "I-I um, just had plans to study…after school." She lifted

her head. “Exams are coming up.”

Was that an open invitation to ask her if it was okay to study together? Should he ask, or wait for her to ask? Should he wish her good luck and walk away again? What was the right thing to *do?!*

“Planning on doing well again, I see,” was the only thing he could think of to say. It worked in his favor. She didn’t appear to be as nervous as much as she was embarrassed from his pitiful attempt at praise. So, he placed his hands into his pockets to keep him calm. “Do you want to study together?” She met his eyes and he suddenly regretted asking. “I mean, if you want to. You can tell me no. I won’t be offended.”

Her hands came together in front of her as she looked back down at them. She shifted her weight around for a few seconds and it was extremely hard for him to breathe. “Y-You want to?”

Makoto’s voice was quiet and shy, something that he would have thought was cute had it not been laced with a sad surprise. He tried to crack a smile in an effort to make her more comfortable. “I would like to, yeah. Who better to study with than someone who’s the best, right?”

He didn’t know what to make of her sorrowful expression or her long inhale. Did he say too much? Should he have been less excited about it? Was she trying to tell him to leave her alone and he took it the wrong way?

“Um, Makoto, if you don’t want to study together, you can just tell me.”

She took him by surprise. “Why do you want to study with me?”

He failed to have a good answer ready. He wanted to spend time with her, to hopefully ease the anxiety he felt around her. But…what kind of answer was she expecting? What was a truthful answer to her? Did she want him to say that he really liked her so she could shut him down once and for all? He had tried apologizing already and *that* didn’t seem to work, so what else could he do?

“You have the best marks in the school,” he finally admitted. “Why wouldn’t I?”

One of her arms crossed over her chest to rest on her shoulder. “Because I’m not a good person.”

He was certainly curious to know where *that* had come from. “What do you mean?”

Makoto shook her head. “It’s nothing.” He opened his mouth to question her more when she beat him to it. “We can study together if you want.”

She turned her back to him and headed for the library, but he reached out a hand to grab one of hers. “Would it be acceptable if we go somewhere else?”

She gave him a confused look, but when her eyes dropped to his hand, he released her. “Is there something wrong with the library?”

A hand ran through his hair. “Well, people tend to *talk* a lot and I can’t focus very well.”

His heart hurt when her face dropped. “Oh.”

“That café in Shibuya is a great place to study,” he added quickly. “It’s peaceful and they have pretty good drinks, too. That’s where I did a lot of my studying for the last exam.”

There was an unknown expression on her face, but she shook her head and it was gone. “That sounds fine.”

He almost, *almost* broke out into a smile, but he settled on a nod of his head. She wasn’t *happy* , but she was neutral. At least, he hoped that she was going with him because she *wanted* to, not because she felt obligated.

However, he felt her hand on his arm as they walked out past the front gates. “Um, Ren?”

It was much harder to look at her when she sounded so timid. “Yeah?”

“I’m…I’m sorry…for how I acted, um…the other day.”

There was a great weight lifted from his chest and he couldn’t contain his smile this time around. “Is that why you think you’re a horrible person?”

She rubbed one of her arms. “Well, it’s…complicated.”

“I don’t think you’re a horrible person.”

He was sad when he lost the contact with her hand as it fell to her side. “Even after I followed you around for so long?”

His smile widened. “I knew you were madly in love with me.”

A hand came up to cover her face. “N-No!”

“I may have been annoyed with you, but then you told me *why* and I understood.” He almost threw an arm over her shoulders, but he thought it was best not to push his luck. “You’re not the only person who has problems going to other people to talk to them about issues bothering them.”

Yeah, that woman from the coffee shop that morning was *definitely* related to her. He would miss the day (if it ever came…) that he couldn’t look into her eyes again. “What do you mean?”

Ren’s hands went back into pockets. “I know I don’t know much about you, and you don’t know much about me, but maybe we could change that, you know?”

Her head tilted to one side. “By studying?”

It was hard not to laugh at her innocence. “I think that’s a great start.”

The conversation died, but he felt so much lighter walking next to her to the station. It wasn’t until they reached a quiet spot outside of the station that Makoto stopped him again. “Would you be willing to show me how you go about making your…um…” She leaned into him and his heart pounded in his chest. “Calling card?”

He needed a second to adjust to the fact that she didn't lean into him to *kiss* him, but then he nodded his head and offered her another smile. "I'm sure we can arrange something, if you help me study to get higher marks on my exams this time around."

He waited a moment, but then there was a small smile forming on her face that left him feeling like she had wrapped him in a big, warm blanket. She said nothing to him and just gave him a light nod of her head.

When they both finally sat down at the café, Ren began to pull a few books from his bag while giving a look to Morgana to tell him to *mind your own business* . When Makoto did *not* do the same, his body went still and an uncomfortable feeling began to swell in his chest again.

"Is…everything okay?"

"Oh," she said quietly. She appeared to be in her own head and his voice had caught her off guard. He almost asked her what she was thinking about, but he chose not to. Makoto kept looking around the café, almost as if she was feeling out of place, then she lowered her head to her chest.

"When are you going to teach me?"

Ren leaned back in his seat and tried to hide his disappointment. He wanted to talk to her about *her* , about what she liked, disliked, what she did for fun. Maybe study if she got too nervous. He didn't want to talk about something that he had very little knowledge about.

"Well, I actually know very little about them," he admitted. "Ryuji made the first one. Him and Yusuke made the second one. So I was going to have you speak to them about it."

There was something on her face that made him worry. Was she going to leave now that he technically hadn't been the person she needed to talk to? He never actually told her that *he* was the one who made them, so would she "study" with him? He could use the excuse of needing to be in the top three for the upcoming exams so he could rub it into his classmates' faces if he felt like she was going

to leave. He could throw out a question about her here and there if he was brave enough.

But her silence dragged on too long and he had to speak again. “Once we find the treasure room, I’ll leave them both to you. But until then, there’s not a lot to do.”

He noticed her eyes narrow, but she never looked up at him. “You do this all in one night?”

Morgana decided it was his turn to take over the conversation. While he explained to Makoto why the calling card had been necessary, Ren sighed and planted an elbow on the table. He reached for one of his books and flipped it open. He couldn’t focus enough on the words on the pages, but it at least helped him to forget about his inability to talk to the girl he liked.

Why was this so *hard?*

Their drinks came to the table and he was relieved to have another distraction. However, when he felt Morgana’s paws on his leg, he couldn’t help but look down at the cat in surprise. His big blue eyes tried to tell him something, but he didn’t pick it up in time before Makoto spoke to him.

“I’m sorry, Ren.”

Oh. Why was she sorry? When he looked over at her, her eyes were down to her drink and the rest of her body was stiff. He felt a tug on his heartstrings. Did he miss something? “Why are you sorry?”

“This is all new to me. I’m sorry I’m not understanding it fast enough.”

Shit . “Oh, no, trust me,” he tried to say through a laugh. “I’ve been doing this for a few months and I still don’t get it. It’s okay.”

Everything about her remained unchanged. Morgana finally clawed at his leg, gave him another stern look, then Ren closed his eyes and took a deep breath. One question. He would ask one question and then he would go from there.

“What’s your favorite color?”

It got her to meet his eyes at least, but what brought a smile to his face was the fact she seemed to recognize what he was asking and her cheeks flushed as she looked away. “Um…”

His smile stretched as he leaned into his hand. “Or your favorite movie? What’s your ideal dinner date?”

Her hands covered her face. “Stop it.”

“Well, my favorite color is blue. I like all sorts of movies. And I also like all sorts of food. So if we ever go out on a date, I’ll let you pick everything.”

Her hands lowered from her face and suddenly Ren became nervous. Did he say too much? Was she going to come right out and tell him he was annoying and she would *never* go out with him? But that blush was so *cute!*

“A-A…A *date?”*

He pushed his luck one more time. “Well, since you’re not dating Sanada, I figured he wouldn’t mind too much if we hung out a little bit more. Right?”

Makoto sighed heavily, and Ren figured he had pushed his luck a little too far. “What did you need help studying?”

Girls.

He needed help studying *girls* .

Chapter 48

Chapter 48

Akihiko was always the one who took the stairs in every building, even if the floor he needed was twenty stories up. It was a great cardio workout. Sometimes, he would try and beat previous times, just to push himself harder. Or, he would take it slow, take the stairs two or three at a time for a different kind of workout.

It was a little different this time around since he could barely *walk* without support, so he swallowed his pride and stepped on the elevator as soon as the doors opened.

He had tried calling Sae several times that morning, but she never picked up. She was likely trying to avoid him, so he had no choice but to confront her personally. He saw a few familiar faces in the courthouse lobby, who all had stopped him to ask about his recent injury. They all wished him well, told him they were working around the clock to find Kaneshiro, and it helped him to realize that he was still missed. It did wonders for his motivation to speak to Sae, even if some of that was crushed when he couldn't run up the stairs…

Thankfully, he was able to walk down the hall without having to avoid curious looks and questions about why he was there. He was also grateful that Akechi had not been around, and that Sae was actually in her office when he finally reached her door.

"I need to speak to you."

Sae looked up from whatever file she was flipping through with a questioning look. When she met his eyes, she was quick to narrow her own. "What are you doing here?"

Akihiko came into the office and quickly closed the door behind him. "You're harassing Sakura-san. Why?"

She held his gaze for several long seconds, then a ghost of a smile came to her face. But not in a good way. "I thought you were resting

at home and not sticking your nose into other people's business."

"Sae," he continued. "No matter what case you're working on, you don't need to force people to speak to you. They're only going to close themselves off."

She ran one hand through her hair. "So by your logic, if he was withholding damning evidence about a case as large-scale as Kaneshiro, I should just pat him on the shoulder and tell him he can talk whenever he is willing?" She snorted at him. "Who the hell do you think I am?"

He could feel her anger from his spot in the room. "You're far too aggressive about it. Sakura-san is a *good* person."

"Did your 'gut feeling' tell you that?"

He knew he was pushing his luck, but he knew Sakura was a good guy. He couldn't really look him up without stopping by the police station, but he did manage to get in touch with Fuuka. She had told him that he had a clean record, but Sakura left his government job for unknown reasons. Even still, if any information he had about his job was what Sae had needed for a case, why go through him and not someone who was currently working at his previous job?

"Who do you think *I* am?" Sae's eyes only narrowed more, but he held his ground and added, "You think I would come to you with *nothing* about someone I have spoken to a handful of times?"

Her hands pounded against her desk and she continued to glare at him. "I don't care what you bring to me. I will never use it. *Never* . I will win this case without your help!"

He sighed. "I get that, Sae, but this isn't the way you should be going about it."

She only laughed at him. "Why don't you do what you do best and keep your leash on your precious child and leave me to do what *I* do best and solve cases?!"

"You're my precious child too, Sae." When she faltered, he added a smile. "Let me help you."

She was quiet for a long minute, her anger fading into something more relaxing. Akihiko continued to hold his breath, knowing Sae could snap at him at any second. She leaned her head into her hands and deeply exhaled.

“I don’t want your help.”

“Do you want to solve this case or not?”

Her head shook in her hands. “I don’t want your help.”

It hurt to see her like this, so tired and miserable and failing to keep it from showing in her voice. He took a few steps forward until he was directly in front of her desk. “I know you hate me, but you can still hate me and do your job with my help.”

He heard her snarl under her breath. “Do you know what accepting your help would do to my reputation?”

There was a chuckle he couldn’t contain. “Would it be as bad as accepting help from a teenager?”

She looked up at him and glared. “And what information do you have that could be useful enough that I don’t have to rely on a teenager?”

“Well,” he started, carefully lowering himself into the closest seat. “I know you’re trying to catch Kaneshiro, but trying to speak to Sakura-san won’t help you.”

Sae leaned back into her chair with a grin that unnerved him. “You think I’m trying to speak to Sakura about Kaneshiro?”

He swallowed that lump building in his throat. “Why else would you go all the way out there?”

“I have nothing more to say to you.”

Sae stood from her seat, but he was not nearly as quick to do the same. He bit his tongue when he stood on his right leg and reached out for the desk to support his weight. “Are you seriously this prideful that you won’t even *listen* to me? Why have you been taking on my

cases, or bailing me out of trouble if you *hated* me as much as you say you do?"

She turned sharply and the anger flared back to life. "You will regret the day you disowned me and my sister! I will prove my worth to this entire city, the entire country, while you sit on the sidelines unable to say a *damn* thing!"

His heart hurt, but he shook it off. "What do you want me to say? What do you want me to do? Nothing I do now will ever make you happy. I could walk up to Fuuka and Mitsuru and tell them to change your last name. I could go to the press and explain who you are and why I did what I did, but you'll still find a way to hate me."

Sae chuckled at him. "It's cute that *you're* upset with *me* ."

"I just don't know what you want me to do," he admitted, his grief pulling him back into the chair. "I love you, Sae, and I would do anything for you. But what you don't understand is that I'm tired of fighting you. If you don't want me to be a part of your life, then that's your decision to make." His hands covered his face. "You'll always be my daughter, the one that made me a father, and I will always stop what I'm doing if you ever needed me."

There was a deafening silence that nearly crushed him. He was tired, and he had even slept relatively well that night. But he was losing heart again, wishing more than anything that Sae would *understand* and put everything behind her, or at least put it off to the side so he could help her.

But he heard Sae snicker again, and the knife wedged further into his heart. "And where were you when I needed you years ago?"

Akihiko said nothing, knowing that Sae was trying to pick a fight, but she continued on in his silence. "You never checked in on me. You never once went out of your way to ask me if I needed help, or if I needed a *father* ." She narrowed her eyes. "So don't you *dare* call me your daughter, or tell me you will be there for me *now* when you were *never* there for me before!"

He groaned and failed to make eye contact with her. "You would

have been this angry with me then, too."

"But you never tried, did you?"

She stormed out of her office, leaving him sitting in the chair suffocating under her words. Sae would never forgive him. She would never love him again, or even want to *speak* to him outside of when she had to. He didn't want to let her go for good, but if that truly made her happy, then he would. He still held onto the hope that one day, something would happen and she would realize that he really *did* love her, but he was sure that day would only come after he was dead, if it came at all.

A few minutes later, he pushed himself off the seat and made his way out of the office, out of the hallway, and out of the building. There was a rumble of thunder in the distance, something he took as a sign that his day was just going to stay miserable. He decided it would be best to head home. Minako might be able to cheer him up, or maybe he could ask Makoto if she still loved him so he knew at least *one* of his daughters still cared.

Things took a drastic change when he went to make his transfer in Shibuya.

"Did you see them?"

"The calling cards are everywhere! The Phantom Thieves have struck again!"

"Who the hell is Kaneshiro anyway?"

"Oh man, I can't wait to see what happens!"

Between his earlier conversation with Sae, the pain in his knee, and the surprising words of those around him, he almost fell down the flight of stairs. He took a detour, desperate to see what the crowds around him had been talking about. He was literally out of breath by the time he was able to walk out of the station. He waited until he caught his breath and the throbbing in his leg went away before he scanned the area around him.

Where was the calling card? Was it just one, or several, or a giant

one? He overheard that someone had said they were *everywhere* , so where were they? He could hear some others around him speaking of the Phantom Thieves, their calling cards, and he was momentarily winded by how energetic the people seemed to be over it.

But how the hell did they know about Kaneshiro?

Akihiko made his way to the Scramble intersection, hoping the cards would be somewhere across the street. As he waited for the light to change, he worried that he knew how this mysterious group of people knew about a high-ranking criminal like Kaneshiro.

Makoto .

She had to know who the Phantom Thieves were. But why would she talk to them instead of her sister? He could understand her fear in taking her case to the police, but…to speak to the Phantom Thieves wasn't anything he would have thought she *could* do. Was that why she had been acting like *she* would take care of everything? Did she *know* they were going to do all of this?

He came to an immediate stop as soon as he was on Central Street. Hundreds of the black and red postcards were found on the concrete walls, store windows, on the ground. A few employees were out removing them, and he managed to catch one staff member before she headed back inside.

"Excuse me," he called out to her, barely able to keep his balance. "Where did all of these come from?"

The young lady shrugged her shoulders. "I have no idea. They were posted here overnight I guess. At least, they were here when I came in for my shift. The police were just here taking pictures and examining everything for clues."

"Do you know who put them up?"

"No idea," she answered. "I think management said they couldn't see anything on the cameras. But this is pretty cool." She smiled at him. "Maybe now the streets will be safe again!"

It was an unintentional stab at the police, but he was able to shake it off enough to reach up and pluck one of the cards off the wall. It was written in the exact same style as the one Kamoshida had brought to him weeks ago. The cartoon phantom drawing had been upgraded in his opinion, but the letters were still cutouts and the words still reminded him of Ryuji.

Granted that if these Phantom Thieves were making criminals turn themselves in, it was starting to become insulting. He took pride in his job, what he had done for the community, but he (and his team) didn't make a scene like these Phantom people were. And he still didn't know *how* they were able to make these prideful, arrogant assholes flip a new leaf overnight and ask for proper punishment.

It was all so unreal. Mind numbing. And worst of all, problematic.

The police force wouldn't stand for this kind of mockery. Sae sure as hell wouldn't stand for it either, especially since this group of people wanted to take her case against Kaneshiro away from her. He could probably find out more details from Makoto, but…what if she told him she knew the identities and refused to tell him? What would he even *do with* that information if she had been willing to provide it? He sure as hell couldn't turn in Ryuji or even Amamiya if they really *had* been the ones to go after Kamoshida…

Maybe Mitsuru would know more about this bizarre turn of events. Because if anyone was an expert in the *bizarre* and *strange* , it was her. He was supposed to meet with her in the afternoon the next day to collect the money he needed to pay off Kaneshiro that same evening, so hopefully she could put his mind at ease and tell him he was simply losing his mind.

He didn't linger in Shibuya for much longer, finding it harder and harder to stop the questions from coming to his mind. It was getting late already, so he didn't want to worry Minako since he had been out for half of the day.

"I thought you were on medical leave?"

Akihiko muffled a groan as he pocketed the card still in his hand. "I am." He turned to face Hitoshi, but was surprised when the kid

wasn't glaring at him. "But you can't stop me from walking around when I need to get out."

Hitoshi ignored him and walked up to the wall with the other cards plastered on it. "Rumor has it that you took some kids to a club and then beat the hell out of the owner when they tried to stop you from letting minors inside."

He rolled his eyes. "Yeah. Sounds like something I would do."

"I don't believe it."

"And why not?" he asked, shifting his weight to better support himself. "Hell, with my injury, I'll probably be chained to a desk for the rest of my life. It would be a great promotion for you."

The young cop kept his eyes on the wall. "You make it sound like I'm one of them." Hitoshi looked over his shoulder. "But for as long as I've had my eye on you to dig up some dirt, I only find good things about you."

Hitoshi sighed before saying, "I wanted to hate you for what happened with Kamoshida. But then I heard from a few of your coworkers that you were actually the only cop who cared. Then I heard you were shot, and the main office had been in an uproar over it. The brass wanted to deny your request to come back to work, but I heard several other people saying that they would riot if they let you go."

While Akihiko was touched that his old crew and coworkers thought so highly of him, he had no idea what Hitoshi's intentions had been by bringing it up. "So you keep tabs on me, tell the brass, they fire me."

The kid cracked a smile. "I do keep tabs on you, but sadly, all I've been able to tell them is that you're not a bad guy." His eyes met his. "They don't seem to like you very much. Yet, I don't know why. The police force seems to think highly of you. The people you've helped seem to think highly of you. So what have you done to the brass to piss them off so much?"

Akihiko shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t put up with their shit, likely. They have another thing coming if they want to use their status as a means to protect people who want to hide from the law.”

“You’re pretty stupid, you know that?”

A chuckle escaped his lips. “Why are you telling me all of this?”

Hitoshi held up the calling card. “The brass wants to find out who these people are. They’re dragging the ‘good name’ of the police through the mud. But I want to find out who these people are and *thank* them. Because like you said, the brass sure as hell didn’t want to look into Kamoshida. Who else would they let fall into their safety net?”

It was all too surprising to hear him talk this way. Akihiko still held his guard up, just in case Hitoshi was planning on him lowering his defenses with words. “You keep up that mentality, and you’ll make a good cop.”

Hitoshi nodded at him before he turned his head back to the wall before them. “I think what they’re doing is great.” He laughed lightly. “I wouldn’t be surprised if I found out you were in charge of this group.”

Oh. Great. If the brass couldn’t find a way to fire him, they would make everyone believe that he was the ringleader of the Phantom Thieves and they could get rid of him that way. Until he could go back into work and hear things for himself, maybe he could use Hitoshi for his own benefit so he knew how things were progressing.

“You should probably head on home, Sanada-san.” Hitoshi bowed lightly to him, something he hadn’t done since meeting him on day one, then the young man offered him a smile. “I still have a long way to go before I’m a good cop like you, and I would like to continue to learn from you when you get well.”

Akihiko watched him put the card into his pocket and walk down the street. His mind was swimming, thanks to the conversation and the fact he needed to get off of his feet. He struggled for the first few steps back to the station, but he told himself that soon he could plant

himself on his bed and make Minako smile with delight since he would tell her he would *love* to rest for once.

But he got a pleasant surprise when he walked into the apartment. Minako greeted him at the door with a hug and a kiss, then helped him to his seat at the table.

“I have something for you.”

He was going to tell her that she didn’t need to go out of her way to get something for him, but with the day he had, he needed it. He was a little nervous, sensing that playful spirit about her that often led her to embarrass the hell out of him. It wasn’t until she came out of the kitchen with two bowls in her hand, a warm smile on her face, that he found himself relaxing.

“Beef bowl?”

She laughed at him as she placed his bowl in front of him. “Don’t sound so disappointed,” she said. “Try it. I did something a little different.”

It’s not that he *wasn’t* happy to have her think of him and make his favorite meal, but he always felt bad since she could tell it wasn’t the same as the style he loved back in Iwatodai. It was always good, and he tried to tell her that every time she made it, but it was often too late.

However, the look she gave him now made him more anxious to try it. “Did you poison it?”

Another laugh came from her mouth and she clapped him on the shoulder. “You wish.” Then she leaned over and planted a kiss to his cheek. “You’re stuck with me for a long time, honey.”

An involuntary blush rose to his face. He grabbed his chopsticks by his bowl and cleared his throat. “So, um, where’s Makoto?”

Minako lifted a sliver of beef from her bowl. “She said she was out with her friends.”

While a part of him was happy that Makoto made a few more

friends, he didn't know if he wanted her out this late or out without knowing *exactly* where she was. A few seconds later, he heard Minako giggle next to him.

"You better eat quickly if you want me to entertain whatever it is you are thinking about."

That got him to choke on his rice. "W-What?"

Minako continued to laugh at him, so he turned his burning attention to his meal. However, he was very impressed with her work this time around. There had always been something missing in the sauce (he never told her that to make her feel better), but after experimenting a few times, she finally hit the nail on the head.

"This is really good, Minako."

The smile that stretched across her face made him warm on the inside. "I think I finally did it, yeah?"

He chose to not answer her question and continue eating the dinner she made for him. He caught her peeking over at him more often than not, but every time he stopped to look at her, she chuckled and returned to her food.

"What?" he finally asked after a few minutes. Minako only waved a hand in front of her, her smile spreading, and her eyes glowing with pride.

"It's been a while since you've eaten like this," she said to him, her eyes falling to the table. "I was worried you were slipping again, given what's happened, so I'm glad to see some life return to your eyes."

Akihiko sighed heavily, his shoulders dropping as he placed his chopsticks by his bowl. "I'm sorry."

"Maybe I should put a little more faith in you after all." He lifted his eyes until he met hers. "I can't imagine how hard this has been on you, not being able to work, or *walk* , but you never cease to amaze me."

He felt his face burn under her stare. “I promised you, and Makoto, that I would keep fighting.” Now if only he had the heart to keep fighting for his other daughter’s forgiveness.

Minako pushed her seat back and came to stand behind him. He soon felt her arms over his shoulders as she rested her head in the crook of his neck, her hands splayed out against his chest. “I know. And I hope you never stop fighting, even when you’re a million years old.”

“That’s crazy,” he said, turning in his seat so he could better face her. “A million years old?”

She carefully placed herself on his lap, careful to not agitate his knee. Her arms draped over his shoulders while his hands rested over her hips. She didn’t answer him or continue the conversation and kissed him instead. It was deep, passionate, but over far too quickly for his liking. She grinned at him once she pulled away, one of her hands running through the back of his hair.

“I made this meal for you, tough guy. Eat it. Makoto should be coming home soon anyway.” She thoroughly enjoyed reminding him that they weren’t parentless young adults anymore. Hadn’t been for *years* , but…she had a way of making his brain stop working for several minutes.

“I fully expect to burn all of these calories off later then.”

His heart jumped into his throat when Minako was the one to hide her blush behind her hand. She swatted at him once before she pushed herself off of him. “I forget you can be playful when I least expect it.”

The atmosphere quickly changed to something more stiff and uncomfortable when Makoto finally came home. Minako had asked her about her day, what she had been up to, but Akihiko had to bite his tongue several times to keep himself from asking her if she knew anything about the calling cards in Shibuya. Minako eyed him curiously from time to time while Makoto finished her meal. She finally called him out before Makoto could stand from the table.

“Something wrong, Aki?”

He took one look at Makoto, but then he shook his head and worked on finishing his own meal. However, the silence that followed made him force Minako’s wonderful creation down his throat to keep his question from coming out.

“Dad?”

“It’s nothing.”

Minako and Makoto spared each other a look before Minako shrugged her shoulders. “I think I know what’s wrong with your dad,” she added with a hint of amusement in her tone. “So go finish your homework or whatever and get ready for bed.”

Well, he doubted that Minako really knew what was going on in his mind, but he could talk to Makoto the next day. Or the one after that. Or when the police force started taking the Phantom Thieves seriously and he needed to act.

But even as his body screamed at him to fall asleep, his mind kept him wide awake. Minako was tucked under his arm and pressed into his side, out like a light. While he was very comfortable, he was also anxious. There were far too many unanswered questions floating through his brain for him to sleep. Even if he knew the answers wouldn’t come overnight.

Minako’s soft breaths were what he tried to focus on. *Inhale, one, two, exhale…What’s going to happen tomorrow…* He rubbed at his eyes with his free hand. *Inhale, one, two…Is Kaneshiro really going to leave us alone once he gets the money?* His arm tightened around Minako, but he froze when he felt her stir next to him. Thankfully, her eyes remained closed and she didn’t wake up, so he once again tried to zone in on her breathing.

One, two…

What was going to happen when he turned over the *sixty million yen* to Kaneshiro? Would he try and blackmail him, or Makoto, or the two boys, for more money? Would he send whatever pictures he had of

them regardless? Would he still send men to kill him until someone was successful?

One, two…

Were the Phantom Thieves going to follow through on victim number three? He was relieved that Kamoshida had been dealt with, but he wasn't aware of Madarame or his crimes until it was public. But Kamoshida and Madarame were *not* mafia bosses like Kaneshiro. He had hundreds of lackeys, many of them unknown, and it wouldn't surprise him if Kaneshiro bribed police to keep him out of prison.

One…two…

Who *were* these people anyway? Would Makoto know them personally, or only through reputation? But then why would they come to her defense if they didn't know her? Did Ryuji and Amamiya know them, too? Were *they* a part of the group? Madarame wasn't someone they would have known…maybe…

One…two…

He wiped at his face again. Even if Ryuji and Amamiya and lord knows how many others were a part of this group, it didn't explain *how* they were capable of such feats. Both Kamoshida and Madarame had drastic changes to their personality, but neither had been under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Neither claimed to have been blackmailed, bribed, threatened… *anything* . It was like someone literally jumped into their heart and ripped it out of them…

One. Two…Stop thinking!!

One…

Two…

Inhale…

Exhale…

His eyes finally closed as he tried to match his breathing to Minako's. Maybe he should have taken his medication, just to help

him fall asleep. Maybe he should wake Minako up and talk to her about what was on his mind. Maybe he could also remind her that he was *not* a bottom person and he could deal with the pain if it helped to *put him to sleep!*

There was an annoying ring by his head, which angered him for two reasons: he was hopefully on his way to some light stage of sleep, and it woke Minako.

“Who’s calling you this late in the night?”

His hand swiped the phone from the nightstand, but he didn’t recognize the caller ID. He wasn’t back to work yet, so he didn’t think someone would be trying to reach him to head out to a crime scene… Was there a crime scene? Was someone wanting his opinion about something?

With that in mind, he answered the call, using a hand to wipe some of the weariness from his eyes.

His back straightened almost immediately and his blood ran cold. “It’s Kaneshiro.”

Minako pressed her hand into his chest to ground him, but he was too far gone hearing the man’s name. “The hell do you want?”

“I know it’s late, but I wanted you to be the first to know…” He trailed off, but there was something about the tone in his voice that struck him. He had heard it once…in Kamoshida…after he came to speak to him at the police station… “I’m turning myself in to Niijima-san when I’m done speaking with you.”

His head smacked against the back of the wall and the phone almost slipped from his hand. “W-What?”

“I will leave you a message for the younger sister and her friends in case I can’t reach them before I destroy this phone. I’ve deleted the pictures. I don’t need the money. I’m truly sorry for all I’ve done for you and to them.”

Was this a prank? A drunken or drugged three AM prank? It was very effective, if that was what this was, but that *tone* . He may have

only stood face to face with Kaneshiro once in his lifetime, but the man spoke with arrogance. He spoke like he was invincible. No one could touch him. Money would always keep him safe. But now he sounded… *broken* . Apologetic. Miserable.

“Did the Phantom Thieves do this to you?”

“Christ, I don’t know,” Kaneshiro mumbled over the line. “I don’t care. I’m done. I don’t want to do this anymore. I won’t hurt you, or those kids, or anyone else ever again.”

The call ended there, but Akihiko still held the phone to his ear like he was waiting for the other man to continue. He felt Minako’s hand around his forearm, shaking him lightly, until she pulled on him with enough force that he tipped over and fell into her.

“Who was that? Is everything okay?”

“It…It was Kaneshiro…” His mind was numb. His words were foreign to him. He felt like a puppet. The darkness started to overwhelm him.

Minako at least pushed him up by his shoulders and shook him. “Akihiko. What did he say? What does he want? Please. Please tell me.”

Her eyes bore into his own with a life that seemed to set off a small spark in the bottom of his heart. He shook his head to clear the clouds of confusion away, then met her eyes with more confidence.

“He’s turning himself into Sae.”

Minako’s hands covered her mouth. “What?!”

Tomorrow.

He would speak to Makoto tomorrow.

He needed to know who these Phantom Thieves really were.

Chapter 49

Chapter 49

Sae didn't even make it to her office before the SIU director met her in the hallway. "I need to speak to you."

Something unsettling landed in her stomach as she followed behind the older man. She worried that he was displeased with the progress she was making in the mental shutdown cases and was going to hand it over to someone else. Or, he was going to tell her she had too many cases and she had to give up at least one of them so she could focus better and *solve* one of them. Or…he was going to drop more cases on her lap she wasn't prepared for.

She needed a vacation…

The director closed the door behind the two of them and took his seat behind his desk. The frown on his face did nothing to calm her nerves. "What's wrong?"

"Juyna Kaneshiro has just turned himself in and he's asking for you." Sae almost laughed at the absurdity of his statement, but the man's frown only deepened. "Those Phantom Thieves are a nuisance."

It took her several minutes to finally grasp that it wasn't a joke. She had to catch herself as she fell back in shock, anger, every emotion that wasn't *good* . "H-How? How did…"

Her mind came to a complete stop. For the first time in *years* , the gears in her head stopped turning. There was nothing. It was unwelcome. Irritating. Humiliating. How *dare* someone make a fool of her! How many people in the office were going to *criticize* her since she had been unable to find Kaneshiro first? How many people would think she was a failure? How many hours of sleep had she lost over the past few weeks trying to track down the man who had it out for her sister?

It was the spark she needed to get her mind rolling again.

Her sister had something to do with it; she was positive. That look in her eyes the last time she had spoken to her, when she made it seem like *she* would solve the problem or *knew* who would.

How *dare* Makoto muddle her career like this!

“We must put an end to the Phantom Thieves,” the old man said, pulling her back into the conversation. “You can go speak to Kaneshiro if you wish, since he was technically your case to deal with.”

“With all due respect, sir,” she breathed out, keeping her voice steady and clear. She would not clue him in on the fury burning inside of her. “I would like to ask to be charged with bringing these Phantom Thieves to justice.”

She would make them pay for stealing her greatest victory from her. She would make them understand what happens to people who *cross* her. *No one* made a fool out of her!

The director sighed and leaned back in his seat. “You have enough on your plate as it is.”

She didn’t care. She wanted this case. She *needed* it. “This is something that we need to solve *now* . And I can assure you,” she said as she stood straighter. “That I will not rest until these vigilantes are brought in.”

Another sigh. “You’re going to need extra hands then.”

“Akechi-kun will do.”

The older man groaned. “I’ll assign you a task force, since you seem to want this case badly enough.”

While she didn’t need the extra people to slow her down, a few extra minds could work in her favor. But if any one of them tried to undermine her… “I understand. Thank you, sir.”

He leaned forward and reached for a pen. “I’ll put them together and have them meet you sometime this week.” His steely eyes met hers. “I hope you understand the seriousness of this case. Failure will *not*

be tolerated."

Was he poking at her for *failing* to bring in Kaneshiro? "Of course."

"You can choose to leave this to someone more capable if you so desire."

Oh, she would *never* desire to hand something like this over to someone else. "I will not disappoint you, or this office, or this country." She would win. She *had* to win. She would not fail again.

He nodded to her, a small trace of a smirk working over his face. "Good. I'll keep you updated on your team as it progresses. I suggest you start your investigation."

And she had the perfect place to start.

She gathered up her thoughts, questions, *demands* and put them on paper to help organize her plan. It was still too early in the day to try and speak to Makoto about what *she* knew, and she doubted that speaking to Kaneshiro would provide her with any actual leads. But she knew very little about the man, what had happened that day with her sister, so she decided to make him her first interrogation. She could work from there.

Sae had never spoken to a "victim" of the Phantom Thieves, but she had read the reports of the previous two. And while she had been wanting to thank this group of vigilantes for saving her sister, they made a mistake treading on her turf. The police could have handled Kaneshiro. A *child* like her sister should have kept to her books and stayed out of trouble.

She had only met Kaneshiro through pictures and rumors, but when she stepped into the interrogation room with him, she could tell he had changed. Sunken eyes, apologetic frown, droopy shoulders. Typical physical indicators that someone was remorseful. It took the breath out of her, knowing that this man had been a top-ranking mafia boss with far too many people working for him, but one couldn't even tell that by looking at him.

She said nothing as she pulled out the metal chair and dropped her

file onto the table. His eyes remained downcast, his expression unchanged, and again, she was thrown off balance. “Juyna Kaneshiro.”

“Sae Niijima.”

He not only startled her with his voice, but the fact he knew who she was without looking at her. It shouldn’t be *too* surprising, given her occupation and his record, but her name came so smoothly off his tongue as if he had been waiting to meet with her.

“I have a few questions I would like to ask you.” His head moving forward and back was the only indication he gave her to let her know he heard her. “Why have you waited until now to confess your crimes?”

She feared it was too general a question, but she could adapt with whatever answer he provided her. “I’m tired of being a criminal.”

Well, that didn’t help her. “You were scamming students in Shibuya. Why?”

“I love money,” he replied quietly. “I would have done anything for more of it.”

Her hands clenched under the table. “You almost got one hell of a cut from my sister, I heard. Why didn’t you wait to turn yourself in until you got your money if you love it so much?”

He sat back in his chair. “I feel terrible for her, and her friends. She only wanted me to stop scamming kids and I nearly shipped her off for a fat chunk of money and killed her three friends.”

Three, huh? “Are they the ones who demanded you turn yourself in?”

She held her breath as Kaneshiro went quiet. Had Makoto and Akihiko planned something behind her back? Makoto she doubted would have the heart to go after someone, but Makoto’s father on the other hand had nearly killed a man over some words. Sae knew she would likely have done the same to Kamoshida, and Kaneshiro had demanded a hell of a lot of money from them for her *not* to

believe Akihiko wouldn't lash out against him, especially given what would have become of Makoto if they failed…

"I have no idea."

She really didn't think he would know, but the longer she thought about it, the more things started to come together. Kamoshida had supposedly been the Phantom Thieves' first target. So someone from Shujin had to have been involved. Whether or not that person was her sister…she didn't want to think about it.

"Please, Niijima-san." Kaneshiro's plea caught her off guard. "I will confess everything. My prostitution ring when I first settled in Tokyo. My money laundering once I moved to Shibuya. I'll provide my contacts. Please. I don't want to do this anymore."

Sae could only stare at him, speechless. Usually she had to twist arms and spew threats before a criminal even *thought* about giving her what she needed. But, was Kaneshiro serious? Was this going to turn into a failed investigation because he was planning on stonewalling her? What was happening?

"You have no idea who these Phantom Thieves could be?"

Kaneshiro shook his head, tears beginning to form in his eyes. Sae thought she was going to be sick. "I don't. I don't care about them. All I care about is going to jail and dying behind bars where I belong."

Sae took that as her cue to leave. Kaneshiro hadn't been as helpful as she needed him to be in her pursuit of the Phantom Thieves, but it was an eye-opener regardless. And as much as she tried to shut off the voice in the back of her head, she told herself that the report on Kamoshida's confession had gone much the same. She could ask Akihiko personally, but…

No. She couldn't. She had to solve this without his help. She made that perfectly *goddamn clear* to him the last time he stopped by her office. However, as she walked out of the courthouse and into the sticky summer air, she knew another confrontation was needed.

She had to ask Makoto what happened that day in the club. Who else had been there? Did she seriously storm a villain's hideout just to *talk* to him? Or did she already know that the Phantom Thieves were going to go after Kaneshiro…?

It was just unfortunate that she didn't know her sister's schedule all that well and had no idea where she would be. She thought about texting her and asking her, but that would have set off alarm bells in Makoto and then she wouldn't meet with her. Maybe an early dinner? Did Makoto have council business after school?

Which is sadly why Sae grit her teeth and dropped by the apartment instead of scaring Makoto off when she needed answers *now* . When the door opened, her mother almost fell over.

"S-Sae?"

She did her best to keep her frustration from showing in her tone. "I need to speak to Makoto."

Her mother's features softened as she stepped back to allow her to enter the room. She noticed Sae hesitate, but then she reached out and grabbed her arm. "You came all this way to see your sister in the hallway?"

One of her hands grabbed the strap of her bag as an outlet for her anxiety. Why was she nervous? She should be angry. Makoto was the reason she was losing credibility in the office. Makoto had the keys to the lockbox of unending clues about the Phantom Thieves. She should have stormed in the second she could and grabbed her sister by her shirt and hauled her off to the station and treated her just as she would a criminal who was withholding valuable information.

"Are you planning on staying for dinner?"

Sae scoffed at her. "You should know the answer to that."

Her mother shrugged her shoulders. "Well, it's almost done, so I can make you a plate to take with you." Sae hated the way she looked at her. "You look tired."

“I need to talk to Makoto.” She waved her hand in front of her face. “Where is she?”

She didn’t have to wait long. “S-Sis?”

“Sae?”

Makoto came to stand next to the couch her father had apparently been asleep on. What surprised her the most was that Akihiko had been the one to approach her rather than her sister, once he was able to find his footing. As much as Sae didn’t want to say it, it hurt (the tiniest amount possible) to see him stumbling because of his injury.

“What are you doing here?”

Makoto chose to stay by the couch, so Sae took a step around Akihiko so she could speak to her. However, she felt his hand wrap around her arm. “Sae.”

She had no choice but to turn and look at him. “I need to speak to Makoto.”

“About what?”

Was he *mad* at her for being there without giving him a notice? Cute. She felt her lips tug upward into a grin. “What, can I not speak with my own sister without your permission?”

He didn’t let her go. “What are you here for?”

Did he know about Kaneshiro turning himself in? Did *he* have something to do with it? Had that been where his unnerving frustration was coming from? “I suppose I could ask *you* about what happened that day with Kaneshiro.”

After almost ten years of Akihiko being afraid of her, hiding from her at every turn, he stood in front of her with a look that made her feel like *she* was a child being scolded by her *father* . The only other movement that caught her attention had been when Minako came up to both of them and placed her hand over the one Akihiko had on her arm.

“Stop. Both of you.”

“It’s okay.” Makoto’s voice was quiet, but it was loud enough that she heard her. “I can tell you, if…if that’s okay.”

Sae tugged her arm out of Akihiko’s grip and walked to stand beside her sister. “Who else was with you that day?”

“Keep your mouth shut, Makoto.”

It took a few seconds for Sae to clear her vision enough so everything wasn’t *red* . She turned back to Akihiko in a fury. “So you both know something about why Kaneshiro turned himself in?”

“He called your father this morning,” Minako said, clearly trying to keep things in the household civil. “That’s how we know he’s in custody now.”

It didn’t work. “First, Kamoshida picks a fight with you, and he’s in prison on his own terms. Then Kaneshiro puts a bullet in your leg, and now *he’s* in prison on his own terms.” She glared at Akihiko. “I’m assuming you know where all of this is headed.”

Makoto stood in front of her, her eyes flaring to life with anger. “Stop it.”

“So what, are you going to *arrest* me then?”

Her mother stepped in front of him, but glanced over her shoulder at her. “Sae, your father had nothing to do with either of those cases. You know that.”

“And what about Madarame?” Makoto’s confidence only fueled Sae’s rage. “Madarame never did anything to him.”

Despite herself, she found her hand grabbing at Makoto’s uniform shirt and yanking her into her face. “You tell me who else was with you or I’ll throw your father into prison like I should have done the first time!”

Even with his inability to walk well, Akihiko was pulling Makoto out of her grip before she could blink. “That’s enough. What the hell is

wrong with you?”

She was shaking. She was *furious* . Why the hell did she even come here? Of course Akihiko would come to Makoto’s defense, even if she really did nothing wrong. But she had to know who else had been there. She *had* to know to win the biggest case of her career. And now her *sister* was at odds with her?

Fine.

Makoto needed to stop acting like the spoiled little brat she was. “I’ll write up the warrant as soon as I get back to my office.” She managed to make her way to the door in the silence that followed her statement. She felt good putting both Akihiko and Makoto in their place, letting them both know that *she* was the one who made the rules and *they* made their decision and *they* were going to pay for it.

“What’s happened to you, Sae?”

Now, her mother was a different story. “Nothing has happened. I simply don’t tolerate hindrances when it comes to winning my cases, regardless of their relation to me.”

Minako stepped up to her. “He’s your father. He has nothing to do with whatever is happening. Neither does your sister. So why are you doing this?”

Her eyes scanned around the room again until they landed on her sister. “I’ll give you a day or two, so I highly suggest you give me the names of the others involved and I can eliminate you and Sanada as suspects in my case against the Phantom Thieves.”

Makoto’s eyes widened, which struck her as interesting. “But…had it not been for them, Kamoshida would still be at-,”

“If this is all you have to say, then I suggest *you* leave and keep your baseless threats to yourself.”

If she was standing close enough to Akihiko, she likely would have punched him in the face. “Then I would recommend finding yourself a decent lawyer who is willing to go up against me in a courtroom.”

She made a move to leave, but her sister called out to her. “Sis, please. Dad had nothing to do with this!”

He has everything to do with this! “Go back to studying for college and leave this to me,” she said through her teeth. She tossed one last glare to Akihiko before turning to her mother. “And I would like to think that if you were hiding evidence about the Phantom Thieves, you would tell me before I had to force it out of you as well.”

“Sis!”

“Get out.” Akihiko came back into her line of sight, his glare evenly matching her own. “You can come back with your warrant or when you’re ready to apologize to your mother and your sister.”

She lifted her bag up on her shoulders and grinned. “Then I’ll be back in a few days with the proper documentation.”

The door slamming behind her effectively cut off any final remarks from the rest of them.

Chapter 50

Chapter 50

“Don’t let that go to waste.”

Makoto jerked in her seat, the recently purchased yakisoba pan falling from her hands and onto her lap. She was lucky she hadn’t opened it yet or that would have been a giant mess to clean up…

“Are you okay?”

She peered over to her right and found Ren glancing at her with an odd look. He seemed to be waiting for an answer. Did he ask her a question? If he had asked something, she didn’t hear him and she wrapped her hands around the lunch she wasn’t really in the mood for.

“Can I help you?”

She heard him laugh beside her. “Always business at school, I see.”

Usually, yes, but no one really spoke to her just because they wanted to. Not even her sister, who had threatened to arrest her dad without any hard evidence against him, knowing that he didn’t have any involvement with Madarame…

“Did you want this?” Makoto held out the bun to offer it to him, but once he got over his initial shock, his eyes became sad. Somewhere deep in her subconscious, she worried she had offended him.

“What’s wrong?”

But what could she possibly tell him? That her sister was going crazy? That her sister was jeopardizing her job just for information she *wanted* to hear? What if Makoto told her *she* was a Phantom Thief? Would Sae call in the police to drag her down into a prison cell and lock her away for the rest of her life? Would her sister do the same to their father if she *didn’t* say anything to her?

She felt a sharp poke on her shoulder and found a weak half-smile on Ren's face. "Cheer up, Makoto. Everything went well. Kaneshiro is in jail. Those pictures didn't get out. It's okay."

As much as she tried to, she couldn't force a smile to put him at ease. "Right."

Kaneshiro was easy compared to her sister. Sae wasn't a criminal. Sae didn't want to hurt her, or, as much as she tried to deny it, her dad. Maybe she was being pressured into making some kind of headway into the Phantom Thieves case. Maybe she could convince Ren and the others to *stop* . Hadn't they done enough anyway?

Ren sighed heavily. "It's okay if you don't want to talk, but you should eat something." He slowly rose to his feet and Makoto's heart felt heavy. "I don't plan on doing anything today, so get some rest. I'll see you tomorrow."

Her eyes fell to the concrete beneath her feet as she heard his footsteps fade in the distance. If anything, she owed him an apology for being rude and unresponsive. She could at least have told him she was spacing out and worried about personal problems. Plus, she feared what would happen to him and Ryuji if her sister did manage to find out the two of them had been in Kaneshiro's club that day.

Instead of eating her lunch, she pushed it into her bag and rushed back inside and up to the third floor. Her mind was much more at ease in a familiar setting. Once she took her seat in the student council room, she reached for her phone and pulled up the group chat. She had to say something to them about her sister. It wouldn't be fair to keep it a secret. Sae was out of control and she didn't want her rage to fall on them unsuspectingly. So she typed out a simple, " *Can we meet this afternoon?"* but then deleted it the next second. She tried to make it sound less intimidating, more polite, more *her* .

The lunch break passed and she ended up saying nothing. However, the second that the last bell signaled the end of the school day, her phone vibrated in her bag. Hoping it was from her new friends, she pulled it out and sighed in disappointment when she saw it was from her mother.

If you don't have business at school, please come home.

While her mom had sent it, she would place a bet that it came from her father's mouth. He had told her that morning that she needed to come home right away. No pit stops. No side ventures. No *nothing* . Sae would likely be waiting for her somewhere to corner her if she waited too long, and her dad was very adamant about being with her when Sae caught up to her.

But she wasn't a child anymore. She could stand up to her sister if she had to. She didn't *want* to, but she would. She didn't want Sae to intimidate her out of enjoying her free time, especially now that she was a part of something much greater than herself. So, against her better judgment, she responded to her mother's message.

I was hoping to talk to my friends after school today. I promise I won't say anything to Sis if I see her.

She didn't wait for a reply back and told herself that since she made the excuse to her mom, she needed to actually talk to her friends. She tossed her phone back into her bag and decided to search for at least one of them to avoid reading another message. Much to her delight, she spotted Ren chatting with Ryuji in their usual place by the second-floor stairwell.

Both boys turned to her as she approached them. She suddenly felt like she had just barged into their conversation. "Um, I'm sorry for disturbing you."

Ren was the first to shake his head. "No, it's okay. Did you need something?"

"Dude, I really wanna ride your bike one day!"

She chose to ignore Ryuji's comment. "I…I was hoping I could…um, talk to everyone. Today."

"Right now?"

Her eyes fell from Ren's and her hands clasped together in front of her. "I know it's short notice. I'm sorry." She then shook her head, realizing her request had been over the top and extremely selfish of

her to ask. “Never mind. I apologize for intruding.”

Makoto slowly turned and headed down the hall, thinking of ways to spend her time so she didn’t appear to be lying to her mother. She could finish up some homework in the library. There were a few things to tie up with the students Kaneshiro had been blackmailing. Maybe she should speak to Mitsuru again and ask her for help…

Something tugged on her wrist when she was halfway up the stairs. It was weak, but it was enough to get her to lose her footing on the next step and she felt herself falling back. Her back collided with something hard, but soft, not the floor, that’s for sure. Once she was able to catch her breath, she realized there were hands on her hips and a warm air by her ear.

“So you *are* falling for me.”

Ren .

She pushed herself off of him too fast that she almost toppled over and face planted into the stairs. Luckily, she was able to gain her balance before that happened. When she came to face him, he was grinning madly at her, as if he had told her the lamest joke he could come up with. She, on the other hand, was far too warm to tell him that she didn’t find his joke very funny and he needed to stop *teasing* her.

“What did you need to talk about?”

His question at least helped her to come to her senses, but in doing so, she remembered *why* she had wanted to speak to everyone. “Oh. It’s nothing. It can wait.”

“Makoto, I don’t want you to feel like I’m prying into your personal life, but are you alright?” His cheesy grin faded into a frown and his eyes darkened with worry. “You don’t have to talk to me, but you can talk to any one of us. You know that, right?”

She found herself playing with her hands as a distraction. If she told him the truth about her sister, then he would question her relationship with her father again. While she hoped that he truly

believed they weren't… *dating…* she couldn't come right out and tell him he was her dad because she had already told him he was *dead* .

Maybe she just needed to be a better liar…

"Um, can I ask you something?"

His eyes had some brightness to them, but she was sure it was the reflection of the stairwell lights. "Of course."

She reached for the strap around her shoulder. "Would you mind following me to the student council room, then?"

The smirk came back to his face and it was hard to contain her blush. Did he know what he was doing? Why was making her blush amusing to him? "Don't want to confess your love for me in public, huh?"

She turned and made her way up the stairs as he chuckled behind her. Was he like this with Ann, too? How did she deal with his odd behavior? She would have to ask her…maybe…once she found out on her own that they were actually dating. She would hate to have Ren feel like she had felt when he had asked about her relationship status…

At least she knew Ann wasn't his *mother* .

"So," Ren said as he shut the door to the room. She found her way to her seat as he followed behind her. "What's going on?"

He was *thankfully* more neutral and she felt much more comfortable speaking to him about a serious topic. "Um, I just have a question…"

Ren waited for her to ask it, but she shamefully lowered her head, unable to get it out. Had Sae not been her sister, she may have been more willing to talk to Ren about it, but she *loved* her, even if she had acted too rash the day before. Surely it was all a misunderstanding.

"Let me just say that I really do appreciate you wanting to try and talk to me." There was an unexpected softness in Ren's tone that

helped to calm her nerves tremendously. “You don’t strike me as someone who wants to ask others for help. And while I know you’re super smart and strong and could probably solve all of life’s problems, I want to help you. Whenever you need it.”

Makoto pulled at her fingers to keep her from tearing up at his kindness. Why was he always so nice to her? Even after following him around, threatening to use the recording of their conversation against him, dragging him into Kaneshiro’s club, he still wanted to *help* .

Ann was lucky to have a good guy like Ren. She was slightly envious.

“Well, um, something happened yesterday that…scared me,” she finally admitted, her hands still tugging at themselves under the desk. “My…well, someone I know said they would have…Sanada arrested because they think he had something to do with the calling cards and the Phantom Thieves…”

She could see Ren’s eyes widen in surprise. However, he was either spinning his thoughts in his own head or he chose to remain silent. In her desperation, she lifted her eyes and held her hands up to her chest. “Something is wrong with her. She’s never acted like this before. But she’s so mad at him for something that happened years ago that it’s blinding her ability to do her job!”

She took a deep breath, then added, “Is there…is there a way I can ask everyone to stop? Can we let the police take care of everyone else from here on out? Please?”

Ren appeared to be giving her suggestion some thought, but Morgana scared her half to death when he popped his head out of Ren’s bag on the table. “I understand that you’re worried, Makoto, but we have support now! There’s so many people we can help that the police won’t be able to touch.”

Her hands flattened themselves against her skirt. “How did we even get these powers to begin with? Why does it have to fall to us to solve society’s problems? We should be focusing on school, on our futures. People like Sanada have worked his entire life to do what

we are doing. We should trust them."

The cat jumped out of the bag and sat down in front of her. "There's a lot I don't understand about all of this either, but I'll tell you the same thing I told Ren and the others. You were given these powers for a reason. It would be a shame to waste them."

Makoto tried not to scowl at the animal. "What good are my powers if I can't protect the people I care about?"

"What's the name of the person going after Sanada-san?"

Both Makoto and Morgana turned to Ren. "Why?"

He ran a hand through his hair. "Well, maybe she will be in Mementos or something and we can do something about it tomorrow. So you can use your powers to protect the people you care about."

Her hands clenched on her thighs. "And what about her? What's going to happen to her?"

Ren held her gaze for a few seconds before he sighed and looked away. "Most people we defeat in Mementos have a minor change in personality. But I wouldn't say these people are *bad* , so much as… mislead. We just straighten them out."

Her heart came to a stop. If Sae was in Mementos and they defeated her, would she be able to forgive their dad? Would they be able to be a fully functional family again? Would she finally be able to see each one of her parents and her sister truly happy?

But what if they failed? Would that trigger something in her sister and she would grow more agitated and would go after their father *without* a reason?

"She's close to you, isn't she?"

Makoto didn't answer Morgana's question. "What if she's not in there when we go?"

"Well, we can try two things to help you." The cat stretched out his

back before looking up at her. “The best and easiest way would be to find her in Mementos. With a little bit of training, we would be able to help that way. The worst case scenario would be that it’s a problem beyond Mementos and she has a palace.” Morgana lowered his head. “I doubt it, by the way you’re talking, so let’s go to Mementos tomorrow and scope out the situation.”

But the idea was already in her head. Did Sis have a palace? Was that why she was so *angry?* Did Kaneshiro’s confession really piss her off that much that she went from a loving and kind older sister to a person consumed with rage and desire to be the best? Had her anger towards their father over several years aided in that? Was that why Sae wanted to *win* rather than seek justice?

She swallowed the dread building in her throat. “Um, how do you know if someone has a palace or not?”

She caught Ren’s eyes narrowing at her, but by the time she looked up at him, it was gone. “We usually say a name with the Metaverse app open and go from there.”

“You should try it!”

Makoto shook her head, desperate to know the severity of the situation, but not with others around her. “Can we check Mementos first?”

Ren and Morgana both nodded. The cat returned to his place in the bag as Ren stood up and waited for her to do the same. They both walked out of the room and down to the school gates in silence. A million thoughts ran through her mind, so even if Ren had tried to speak to her, she wouldn’t have heard him. She didn’t even realize she was walking the wrong way after they had left the school grounds until Ren pulled on her arm.

“Who is she, Makoto?”

Her eyes scanned around the street, thinking Ren had been asking who a specific person had been. But she saw no one she could pick out, and it made her realize that he had been asking who *Sae* had been.

“Um…”

He lifted his hand to his head. “You care a lot about the people close to you. I get that. But…don’t do anything reckless. Okay? We will go into Mementos tomorrow and take care of the problem as a team. You can trust us.”

She was getting really tired of worrying him with her pitiful excuses and lies and… “I do.”

But she went home that night, silently nodding while her dad scolded her for not coming home when she was supposed to, then bolted to her room as soon as she finished her dinner. She held her phone between her hands as she sat on her bed, knees to her chest, one of her many Buchimaru plushies under her chin. She took several deep breaths, but every time she went to open the Metaverse app, she froze.

Sis didn’t have a palace. It would be insulting to even look.

But she was different lately. Maybe she finally snapped?

She was a horrible sister, not keeping in touch with Sae and letting this possibility even *exist!*

Push the damn button!

No.

Sae was always good to her. Every other bad guy the Phantom Thieves had gone after had tried to *harm* someone. Sae wouldn’t pin her up against a wall and threaten to beat the living hell out of her. Sae wouldn’t try and kill their father and blackmail her over pictures and their *lives* . Sae may have been angry and desperate for answers, but it was just pressure. Her job was hard. Maybe she had a bad day and took it out on her.

Push the damn button!

Insulting or not, Makoto *needed* to know one way or another or she would be unable to sleep. She squeezed her eyes shut, tightening her hold on both her phone and the toy, and worked up the strength

to drop her thumb over the app.

She felt like she was hyperventilating, but she didn't know how much time she had before the app closed and she had to repeat the damn process. The sooner it was behind her, the sooner she could relax, laugh it off, and sleep peacefully knowing that her sister wasn't the monster her mind tried to perceive her as.

"S-S…Sae…Ni-N-Niijima…Sae Niijima."

Candidate Found.

She didn't know what fell faster; the phone from her hands or the tears from her eyes.

Chapter 51

Chapter 51

Meet me at the bar. 1800.

As much as he wanted a *fucking drink* right now, Akihiko doubted it would be wise to mix alcohol with his medication. He only took them when he had to, usually when he was walking around too much, but he had just started his first week of physical therapy and his knee burned like a bitch. He almost told Mitsuru that he wouldn't be able to make it, but even through a text, he could tell it was important.

Mitsuru probably had a lot of questions about the growing curiosity around Kaneshiro. She probably dealt with a lot of confusion from her allies when she had to break it to them that she, in fact, had not needed sixty million yen.

"Got yourself a date with a pretty girl?"

Minako laughed as she sat down next to him on the couch. How the hell she had managed to stay so *cheerful* despite Sae's recent behavior was beyond him. Then again, Minako always was the one who chose to see the light in the darkness rather than be consumed by it.

Sometimes he wished he could be half as positive as her. "It's just Mitsuru. She probably has a lot of questions in regards to what happened and why she even fronted the money to pay him off."

Minako's arm wrapped around his shoulder. "She wouldn't be mad at you. It's not like you knew what would happen..."

There was a blank look on her face the next second and it made his heart stop beating. "Are you okay?"

"Huh?" She blinked moments later and she appeared to regain her senses. "Sorry. I just…never mind." She pulled herself away from him and stood, heading into the kitchen before he could question her

change.

He was at least able to move around better, but he still needed his crutch for the time being. So by the time he was able to successfully reach the kitchen, Minako had busied herself with preparing dinner. “Minako?”

She turned to him with a smile, a *fake* smile, and something pulled at his stomach. “Let me know when you get there, please. And let me know when you’re done.”

“Did I say something wrong?”

Her movements came to a halt and he braced himself for the worst. “No. I just remembered something is all.”

“What?” he asked, braving to take a few steps closer to her. Minako turned around, but when she refused to look up at him, he felt a cold prick in his chest.

“Makoto.” That cold prick began to freeze the inside of his heart. “She said something to me a while back, while you were still in the hospital.” Minako held a hand to her head while he worked on trying to control his erratic heartbeat. “She told me to trust her then, but… ah,” she sighed as she shook her head. “I’m thinking too much.”

He reached out for her hand. “No…I…I worry that Makoto might know something about what happened, too. But…I don’t want to think about it.”

“What if she’s hiding something from us again?” She leaned into him, both of her hands coming to rest against his chest. “I know she’s growing up, but she’s still our daughter. What if she’s getting into trouble? What if her friends aren’t good friends? What are we supposed to *do?”*

It was rare to have the tables turn like this and *he* had to be the strong one, but he had to say something. Her fears were his fears, and he knew better than to hide and run away from them now. His arms wrapped around her and he held her tightly.

“If she did have something to do with Kaneshiro’s change, then I will

do what I can to keep her from being investigated."

Minako clutched his shirt with her hands. "And what's going to happen with Sae? She's going to turn on Makoto and this family is going to fall apart…"

He pushed against her shoulders to look into her eyes. "That's not going to happen. I promise. Sae's just…angry and took it out on her sister. If she had been serious, then she would have come storming in here yesterday and arrested both of us."

"Sae's never been this angry before, Aki."

"I know," he replied, his tone losing some of its earlier confidence. "So you keep an eye on Makoto. I'll keep my eyes on Sae. I might even be able to talk to Mitsuru about what the hell is going on and she can help out."

Minako wiped a hand over her eyes and nodded. "I just wish everything was normal again."

The first thing that came to his head was, *when have things ever been normal?* But he opted to say, "Then things would be boring."

A small smile worked its way on her face. "And you can't have that, can you?"

His hands found their way to her hips. "Neither can you."

Minako fell back against him as his hands met in the small of her back. He didn't say anything to her. She didn't say anything to him. He chose to comfort her with his hold rather than with a poor choice of words. He had never been good with words anyway.

"You should probably head out soon." She leaned back in his arms and it was much harder than he thought to let her go. The smile on her face helped to ease some of his sadness. "If you need me to come get you or anything, please let me know."

His exhale was a laugh. "Then who's going to keep an eye on Makoto?"

“She knows not to push her luck,” she added with a smirk. “You, on the other hand, keep trying.”

What Akihiko would not admit to her was that he was tired of “pushing his luck”. He was tired of the surprises. He was tired of nothing making sense. He was tired of worrying, getting angry, feeling helpless, being lost…

He really would take a boring life if it meant things would get better.

To Akihiko’s surprise (and relief), the bar was practically empty when he arrived. Lala smiled devilishly at him when he walked into the establishment, then noticed the crutch and his limp and her grin faded into concern.

“Oh, honey, what happened to you?”

He managed to walk up to the bar easily enough. Maybe he was on his way to recovery? He still couldn’t walk well without support, but, at least he could put pressure on his right leg without it paralyzing him in pain. “Met up with an old friend. His friends weren’t all that welcoming.”

Lala didn’t seem to enjoy his sarcasm and narrowed her eyes. “I thought you were a better judge of character.” Akihiko brushed off the insult as he looked around the bar. “Guess you’re not having a drink for a while, eh?” Lala added with a sigh. “Ohya will be saddened to hear this.”

It was odd to him that said reporter wasn’t in her usual seat at the bar, but all of that quickly faded away when he finally spotted Mitsuru and a few other not-so familiar faces. He panicked for half a second, but then he got close enough to the corner booth to put names with the two faces.

“Well, this sure is a surprise.”

A half smile crept on to his face as both Fuuka and Ken turned to face him. He couldn’t remember the last time he had seen either of them, but despite the years that had passed, it was still nice to meet up with them again.

Ken shot out of the booth first, an oddly, yet comforting childish grin on his face. “Sanada!”

Akihiko couldn’t fight the urge to drop a hand on top of the younger’s head like he was ten. Ken had changed quite a bit since he had last seen him before he moved out to Tokyo. His brown hair was cut shorter than when he had it in his younger years. He had grown in height, almost standing on par with Akihiko, but he had kept a thinner frame. Ken almost looked like he was a typical college student, the stubble on his face and his casual style of dress making him appear half his age.

“Mitsuru told us what happened,” Ken said as he pushed his hand off his head. “Are you doing better?”

Akihiko responded with, “I’m managing,” as he sat down in the booth after Ken, stretching his leg out to the side. His eyes caught Fuuka next, and she looked like she hadn’t changed at all. She still had her young features, long and braided hair, warm eyes, and a shy smile.

He never thought he would have missed his friends as much as he did. Until now. “It’s great to see you both again.”

Fuuka clapped her hands together. “When Mitsuru asked me to come to Tokyo, I got so excited! I’ve never been to the big city before!”

That was when it dawned on him. “What are you guys doing here anyway?”

Last he could recall, Ken lived up north outside of Sapporo with his wife (their wedding had probably been the last time he had seen Ken). He was embarrassed to admit that he had no idea what Ken did for a living, if he had any kids, why he had chosen to settle in a colder region of the country. Fuuka remained in Iwatodai and did a number of projects that Akihiko couldn’t begin to understand. Computer tech stuff. She worked with Mitsuru a lot, so her presence wasn’t *too* surprising, but…

Ken grabbed the beer bottle sitting in front of him. “Mitsuru says you guys meet up here quite a bit.” He took a drink and Akihiko had to

remind himself that Ken was not so young anymore before he slapped the bottle out of his hand. Ken's arm draped over the back of the booth before he said, "But apparently, there's been quite a bit of trouble, too."

Akihiko locked eyes with Mitsuru. "Mind telling me what's going on?"

"The Phantom Thieves."

Hearing their name, Akihiko could feel himself sinking into his seat. Did Mitsuru think he was one of them and this was some form of interrogation? Did she *know* who they were? Did she think Makoto was one of them? … *Was* Makoto one of them? Is that why they both had been so secretive that night they went out "to talk"?

Fuuka reached for her phone in her bag beside her. "They seem to operate a fan-based website that I found once Mitsuru brought them to my attention the other day." Her fingers worked on the screen until she put the phone on the table. "It's pretty general for the most part, but what caught my attention were the requests."

Akihiko leaned into the table to get a better look at what she had been talking about. "What kind of requests?"

"It seems that anyone can post a name and a reason they should "change" and if selected, the Phantom Thieves will take care of them."

His heart pounded in his chest. What the hell did all of this mean? Had the Phantom Thieves seriously been operating out in the open? Someone like Fuuka could have easily done something (he would never know what) to find them this way. But, perhaps Makoto had found out about the site and threw Kaneshiro's name on the board. But…how would she have known his name? Sae sure as hell didn't tell her. He sure as hell didn't tell her.

Akihiko shook his head to keep the growing concern from plaguing his mind. "So this is how they targeted their victims?"

Fuuka nodded lightly. "Well, I'm not sure. There's a lot of names, but we looked into a few of the people who appeared to "change". No

one really had anything bad on their record, just some mild disturbances or problems at work. But when Mitsuru asked me to look for Kaneshiro's name, it turned up nothing."

Beside him, Ken took another drink. "Bigger criminals, bigger targets. Which leads me to believe that their members must have known them personally or knew someone who did."

Hearing his statement made Akihiko grow cold. Sadly, that feeling only intensified when Mitsuru pushed a picture of someone he had seen in passing only once, but he would never forget that day as long as he lived.

"Yusuke Kitawaga." Mitsuru retracted her hand and crossed her arms. "One of the young teenagers I saw with your daughter the other week."

It was getting harder to breathe. "And why are you showing me this?"

Mitsuru chuckled at him. "He's the missing link. He was one of Madarame's pupils." She brushed a lock of hair out of her face. "I noticed the artwork in the café you took me to last week. That was when Fuuka was able to make the connection."

"What does all of this mean?" He didn't want to hear it. He could already feel eyes glaring at him and accusing him of being *so stupid* for not figuring it out earlier. Well, he had, but he wasn't confident about his judgments.

If what Mitsuru said was true, then Ryuji and Amamiya were more than likely a part of these Phantom Thieves. They had "taken care" of Kamoshida. They likely did the same for Madarame with Kitawaga's assistance. However, he still couldn't convince himself that *Makoto* was a member of their group… She knew better. Plus, he was a cop, and his own daughter going behind his back to throw criminals in jail was beyond insulting. He could let Kaneshiro slide, given the circumstances, but their streak had yet to end. Would it?

"I know what you're thinking, Akihiko," Mitsuru said with a quiet voice. "But you misunderstand me. Everything right now is only a

conjecture. Which is why I've asked all of you here."

As much as he tried not to, Akihiko slammed his fists onto the table. "You want me to arrest *children* for saving my *daughter* from a man that I couldn't protect her from?"

A hand cut him off. "Not at all. I'm still confused as to how they are going about this and how they received these powers in the first place. But please understand, Akihiko, my primary goal is not to bring judgment upon this group of people. I need to stop others from taking advantage of their abilities and using them for selfish purposes. In order to do this, I need to know *how* their actions are possible."

Ken's empty drink hit the wood with a *clink* . "They're pretty impressive if you ask me. But they need to stop. They can't seriously think they can change the entire world by taking out a select few bad guys. How many more Kaneshiro's are out in the world? Or these other guys?"

Akihiko didn't want to think about it.

"Regardless," Mitsuru added. "If we approach them with the knowledge of what they are doing and *how* they are able to work, we can convince them to stop. No one needs to know who they are. But if they keep this up and their reputation begins to get the better of their pride, it will be harder to speak to them."

That was when Fuuka asked the damning question. "Do you know who they are?"

Akihiko's mind came to a grinding halt as Mitsuru pulled out a file. She carefully opened it up, keeping the information shielded to just them, and produced the first picture.

"Ren Amamiya. A transfer student in his second year. According to some research, he's been slapped with a criminal record and had to move to Tokyo to serve out a probationary sentence for a full year. He was about to be expelled from school for unknown reasons just before Suguru Kamoshida confessed to his crimes."

The second picture replaced the first. “Ryuji Sakamoto. A second year. One that suffered personally at the hands of Kamoshida over a year ago. He too would have been expelled from the school had Kamoshida not turned himself in to the police.”

“Stop.”

Three pairs of eyes landed on him, but Mitsuru ignored his pleas. “Yusuke Kitawaga. A second year at a different high school. It is unclear to me how the boy managed to meet the other two, but the portrait in Leblanc proves to me that Madarame or Kitawaga knew Sakura, who houses Amamiya. As Madarame’s star student and likely main target of his crimes, it serves the missing link between the Shujin scandal and Madarame.”

Akihiko held his breath, but then Mitsuru closed her file and put it away. Was it still too recent to have her point the finger at Makoto for being the one who led the Phantom Thieves to Kaneshiro? Was she saving that information for a more private talk so Ken and Fuuka wouldn’t have to know about his never-ending family drama? Or did Mitsuru not want to admit it, even to herself?

“I’ll reiterate,” Mitsuru started. “My primary objective is to understand what’s happening and how it’s happening. I’m not positive that these students are a part of the Phantom Thieves or if they personally know who is. This is why I’ve asked you all to help.”

It took some time, but finally, Akihiko was able to gain feeling in his hands from when he had clenched them too tight for too long. He remained as alert as possible, ready to deflect a conversation topic about his family if he had to, but he did his best to make sure he wasn’t appearing as anxious as he felt.

Mitsuru turned her eyes to Ken. “You’ve always been a top tier investigator, Ken. I would like you to keep your tabs on Shujin for us. It shouldn’t be too difficult, as you’ll be taking over the vacancy left behind by Kamoshida.”

Hearing this, Akihiko’s eyes widened in surprise. “You’re a *spy* , Ken?”

The younger man laughed beside him. “Hell no. I’m a teacher. Elementary school science.”

Of all things he pictured Ken to be, a teacher was not one of them. “Oh.” However, he felt like a horrible person to ask why he had chosen that path in life over several others when he should have asked Ken that question *years* ago.

Across from him, Fuuka giggled into her hands. “He’s a very good *liar* , Akihiko. He teaches junior high.”

Great. So Fuuka knew Ken had been a teacher, too. “I sure as hell don’t coach volleyball,” Ken said after he leaned back against the seat. “I scoped out the area when I came in yesterday. I forget how congested Tokyo can be.”

Akihiko’s mind was still scrambling to piece together the past while trying to remain focused on the present conversation. Fuuka spoke next. “I love it. There’s so much to see and so much to do!”

“I miss the country,” he finally said, diving into the conversation like he wasn’t feeling like a terrible friend. “It’s hard to stretch out and breathe here sometimes.”

Ken slapped him on the arm. “That’s why I like Sapporo. It’s not huge, but it’s big enough to accommodate everyone’s styles while keeping the scenic countryside!”

“I hate to interrupt, but we need to stay focused for now.” Mitsuru exhaled deeply, a frown forming on her face. “Ken, you start next week. While it’s not expected of you to coach a club, I suggest you pick one that’s not currently an option at the school. You’ll be teaching health science.”

Beside him, Ken slapped his hands together. “Yes!” He reached for his empty bottle. “This calls for a celebration!”

Mitsuru cleared her throat to keep him on topic. “Fuuka and I will continue to monitor the website and look into other possible members.”

He felt like a child for a second when her eyes landed on him. “And,

um…what am I supposed to do?”

“Monday, you’re going back to work.”

Akihiko almost copied Ken’s previous actions, but he settled for a much quieter reaction. “Please tell me I’m not going to be stuck behind a desk again.”

She smirked and his excitement level cut in half. “You need to walk successfully before that happens. So, until you are able to do so, you will serve as the police intel and keep us informed on the investigation. I would like to think you have friends in all corners of the city that can serve as your eyes and ears in your stead, yes?”

He didn’t want to tell her that he did…maybe, but he also knew better than to tell her no. “I guess.”

Mitsuru nodded and a smile spread over her face. “Then our mission is clear. We will meet back here as needed. I also have these for you.” She reached into her bag again and pulled out a small box. “I need this to remain covert. Until we can eliminate the threat of danger, don’t trust anyone unless I deem otherwise. Understand?”

She passed each of them a different accessory. He was suddenly embarrassed at how little he knew about modern-day technology as he watched Ken reach out and grab his overly large watch and clasp it around his wrist.

“Sweet. I’ve always wanted one of these!”

Mitsuru sighed in annoyance. “I can message you and speak to you about the job without using your traceable phone.” Since when could someone communicate with a *watch?* “The same goes for you, Akihiko.”

He reached for his and tried not to sound confused. “Um, you can speak to me with this?”

Fuuka found his confusion entertaining. “Ken’s watch is basically a phone. We can call him and message him and he can do the same. We figured you wouldn’t appreciate it as much, so we downgraded yours.”

“I have to wear this all the time?”

Mitsuru grinned. “I think you’ll like the device, Akihiko. It’s worn by the younger generation now so they can monitor their heart during exercise. You can only receive messages from Fuuka, Ken, or myself, so here’s your specialized phone to communicate with us when your watch triggers you to do so. Just make sure you’re covert about it.”

Ken threw an arm over his shoulders. “Grandpa over here needs to get with the times.”

Grandpa?

He shook his head violently and pushed Ken’s arm off of his shoulders. “I’m not that old!”

“Isn’t your oldest like, in her late twenties now?”

The atmosphere became stifling again, but Akihiko couldn’t let him know he had opened a wound. But no matter how hard he tried to *say something* , nothing came out of his mouth.

Mitsuru, thankfully, spoke for him. “Please keep in mind that these are for work purposes only. Use your primary phone for everything else, including gaming, Ken.”

“I don’t think I can download a game onto this watch anyway.”

Fuuka smiled. “It looks good on you.”

“I would like to ask us to meet back here every other week in the afternoon to discuss our next steps.” Mitsuru passed him a much more familiar piece of technology, a flip phone, then threw her bag over her shoulder. “Until then, any urgent finding can be reported by your recent devices.”

Fuuka slid out of the booth after Mitsuru. “Don’t stay up partying too much, you two.”

Ken simply waved her off. “I’m sure someone here has a bedtime.”

“Hey.”

Everyone around him laughed to some extent. A minute later, both Mitsuru and Fuuka nodded and said their goodbyes and walked out of the bar. Ken scooted himself out of the booth on the other side of him, cradling his empty bottle in his left hand.

“We have a hell of a lot to catch up on!” He smiled widely at him. “Let me get you a drink!”

Akihiko figured *one* wouldn’t hurt. “ *One* , because I don’t have a bedtime.”

Ken laughed again as he walked off to fetch their (surprisingly) prepared drinks. Ken sat across from him, took one drink from his bottle, then slammed it down on the table. Akihiko never pictured Ken being a beer drinker… “You should ask Minako to come out! Assuming she’s allowed to, of course.”

Akihiko debated the idea for a few minutes. He figured it would be rude to keep Ken’s presence in the city a secret from her, but at the same time, if she came out, would Lala put two and two together and figure out Minako was his wife? Would Ken get too excited and say something instead? But, they were just a group of “friends”. High school buddies hanging out after years of not seeing each other.

However, the real reason he broke down and called Minako was because he knew if Ken brought up Sae again, no one would be able to deflect the topic for him.

Chapter 52

Chapter 52

Despite her efforts, Minako could tell Makoto was eyeing her with intrigue from across the dinner table. However, her daughter's question was not the one she expected.

"So, um, where's Dad?"

Minako breathed out a sigh of relief. She wanted to ask Makoto if she knew what happened with Kaneshiro, if she had anything to *do* with the situation, or if she was just losing her mind. She was grateful for the slight change in topics so she didn't drown in the stiff silence.

"He's out with a pretty girl," she added with a light laugh. "He'll probably be home soon."

If Makoto wanted to question her statement, she chose not to. "Oh." Her daughter then continued to stare at the spot by her dinner plate, but she could see a million different questions on her face.

Minako spoke first. "How's your boyfriend doing?"

Makoto threw her head back and groaned. "He's *not* my boyfriend."

"I think you two would make a cute couple," she added, much to Makoto's embarrassment.

"Mom, stop it…"

"You make him feel welcomed in the big city. He walks you home after school. You spend time with him after class." Minako's smile widened. "How is it possible for you two to *not* be dating?"

Makoto's hands went under the table and her head dropped to her chest. "Because I'm not his type."

Oh. Had Minako been misinterpreting *who* Ren had been speaking

about the other day? Or had she been correct and now they both felt they weren't each other's type? "Why do you say that?"

Makoto lifted a hand to her chopsticks and made a move to eat. "He likes pretty girls."

So it was a self-confidence thing. She was sure of it now. "Well, go find a better guy."

"I don't want to find a better guy because I don't *want* a boyfriend."

Minako chuckled quietly behind her hand. "If you say so."

Her daughter continued to work at her meal instead of speaking or looking up at her. Minako was relieved, to an extent, to have avoided Makoto's earlier curious stares, but once again, the silence made it that much harder to keep the questions from coming to her mind.

Was she in trouble?

Was she hanging around the wrong crowd?

Did Sae have a justifiable reason to interrogate Makoto? Or Akihiko?

She nearly banged her knees against the table when her phone went off behind her in the kitchen. She pushed herself away from the table, ignored Makoto's confused expression, and reached for the phone.

She threw on a smile and turned her back on her daughter as she answered Akihiko's call. "Boring date, I see."

She grew warm when she heard him chuckle over the line. "She's already bailed on me."

"Maybe you shouldn't lead a conversation with one of Junpei's pick-up lines that have never once landed."

"H-Hey!" She would have *loved* to see his face. "I'm not dropping stupid pick-up lines anymore!"

Minako put a hand to her mouth. “So you’re depressed now and you need to come home and let me make you feel better?”

He cleared his throat while she laughed. “Um, later…maybe. But no, I’ve called for a different reason.”

It shouldn’t have been surprising. Akihiko never called her just because. The few seconds of small talk elated her, but she should have known there was a reason to his call. “And what’s that?”

“Ken’s here, and he wants you to come over and say hello.”

The phone almost fell from her hands, but she managed to keep her grip tight enough on the device. “K-Ken? Ken Amada?”

When was the last time she saw Ken? At his wedding almost fifteen years ago? When was the last time she *spoke* to Ken outside of the yearly New Year’s greeting cards that she had sadly stopped sending once Sae turned on her father? Would it even be acceptable to speak to Ken again after so many years of not speaking to him?

“I know what you’re thinking, Minako, but it’s okay. I’m sure there’s a lot about us he doesn’t know either.”

Most of that information she would prefer to keep that way…

“Where are you?”

“The bar in Shinjuku. Did you know Ken’s a drinker? He’s on his third one already. Says Tokyo is a haven for craft beer.”

Minako smiled sadly, suddenly desperate to see *all* of her old friends again. Ken’s wedding may have been the last time the group had been together. But, she also told herself that *now* would be a good time to change that. She had been their leader, someone they had all trusted, and she was the first one to pull out of their lives. She still kept in touch (over the phone) with Junpei and Yukari on occasion, and Akihiko kept in touch with Mitsuru and Fuuka for work purposes.

She had no idea what happened to Ken after he got married.

She had no idea where Aigis was, if she was even still functioning.

She said with a heavy heart that Koromaru was likely too old to be alive now.

Maybe once Makoto had graduated, she would ask for a reunion back at Iwatodai just to say she was sorry for being a horrible friend.

“Minako?”

“Oh, I’ll be right there.”

She ended the call before Akihiko could question her, but she continued to stand in the kitchen with her phone pressed against her chest. Would Ken get angry with her for not keeping in contact? Why was Ken in Tokyo anyway? Oh, right, she wouldn’t know *that* either.

What did she know anymore?

“Mom?”

Minako turned to Makoto and did her best to offer her a not-so fake smile. “An old friend is in town tonight and your dad wants me to go say hello.”

Makoto, on the other hand, gave her a much more relaxed smile. “You should go then.”

But if she did go and leave her daughter behind, what would Makoto do? Would she run out and get into more trouble? Would she get hurt? Was she planning something?

“It’s okay, Mom. I won’t leave. I’m actually pretty tired today.”

Either Makoto was getting smarter or Minako was losing her ability to mask her emotions. “Promise me you won’t go out while I’m gone?”

There was a steady aura about her daughter that made her believe in her when she said, “I promise, Mom.”

“If I find out you left, I’ll be sure to put a GPS signal on your phone or

on your headband and you'll *never* be allowed to leave again." Makoto's eyes widened at her threat, but she eventually nodded her head in understanding. Minako gave her a quick hug before she turned to the door and grabbed her bag.

"I don't know when I'll be home, so call me if you need anything, okay?"

Makoto's smile came back to her face. "Have fun, Mom."

It was strange to be heading out when she was used to getting ready for bed this time of night, but it was kind of exciting. The first time her and Akihiko explored Tokyo after they had moved to the city, they went out and about at night. It was impressive, seeing all the lights, the people, the *energy* . To be a part of all of that made her feel alive. But a year later, she found out she was pregnant with Makoto, and that quickly put an end to the adventuring around the city.

To be back out in it almost twenty years later was strangely exhilarating. The streets were filled with people of all ages, dressed in a variety of styles, and doing a variety of things. Younger teenagers were glued to their phones. Middle-aged people were clutching their bags after a supposed long day on the job. Older people were lounging around the sidewalks, sitting on benches, simply watching the world around them.

Shinjuku brought a million different colors, smells, and noises to her senses. It was oddly rejuvenating. Why hadn't she asked Akihiko to go out with her before? He may not have been as happy about the clusters of people and activities as she had been, but she guaranteed he would have been happy to see *her* happy. She also wanted to bet that she could act like a young adult again, clinging to him like they were dating for the first time, and no one around them would even bother to notice.

Kabukicho, on the other hand, was more intimidating. She heard a few stories from Akihiko about the place, and while it had been cleaned up, he always warned her not to linger for long. Which brought up her next question of why he chose to frequent the bar in the area as a "hang out" if it was so dangerous…

A hand on her shoulder brought back reflexes she had forgotten she had. She slapped the hand away as she turned to the one who touched her. “Sorry, I’m not interested…”

She threw a hand to her face to cover her laugh when Akihiko frowned at her. “Oh, so *now* you’re not interested?”

“Maybe you shouldn’t act like one of the creeps you always tell me about,” she said as she took a step closer to him. “You told me the streets are full of them.”

He surprised her when he made a move for her hand. “I didn’t want you to walk through this place alone, and I don’t trust Ken with the task.”

Bringing up their mutual friend brought another wave of insecurity over her. “So, is he mad? You know, for us kind of falling out of his life?”

Whether or not he could pick up on the concern in her voice, he said nothing at first and lifted his arm to wrap around her shoulder. She thought she was serving as a support for him since he was still struggling to walk, but then he leaned into her and kissed her temple.

“He’ll forget if he keeps drinking as much as he is.”

Her worries vanished the next second. Akihiko *never* acted like this in public, and she was going to soak it up for as long as it lasted. He kept his arm over her shoulders as he led her to his favorite hangout and only released her to open the door for her.

He was a little more stiff inside the bar, but she quickly found out *why* . “Oh, bringing a new beautiful girl to these parts, hmm?”

The bartender approached her and instead of a handshake or a bow, the large lady hugged her. “You must be the wife I’ve been dying to meet.”

She shot a nervous look to Akihiko, who only rubbed the back of his head. The lighting made it hard to tell if he was blushing or not, but she *knew* . “H-How would you know that?”

The woman clapped him on the back with a big smile. “Honey, you’ve been coming to this bar for *years* . I’ve never once seen you look so *happy* than when you followed this special lady through that door.”

Minako didn’t know if she should be amazed by the woman’s deductions (that were also true) or if she should be terrified that Akihiko was going to freak out and become distant. She watched the strange lady walk back behind the bar, then she felt Akihiko’s fingers lace through her own.

“So my secret’s out, but I trust her.” His other hand went back behind his head when she looked at him. His embarrassment was too cute for her to handle. “Um, is that…okay with you?”

She figured it would be a bit much to kiss him on the spot, so she settled for a laugh and a squeeze of his hand. “I guess we will be coming here more often then.”

“I would take you to the beef bowl place, but now I don’t need to go if you keep making it for me.”

The bartender pushed one glass towards them, pulling Minako’s attention away from the precious smile that took over Akihiko’s face. “I’m afraid I don’t know what you prefer, my dear, or I would have given you a drink as well.”

“I haven’t had a drink in years,” Minako admitted as the two of them approached the bar. “I wouldn’t even know what to have.”

“She likes everything sweet,” Akihiko told her, earning a smirk from the woman behind the counter.

“She made a mistake with you then, I see.” Minako laughed as the lady grabbed a bottle from behind her, another one from behind the countertop, then mixed the contents in another glass. She poured the liquid over ice, the light pink color of her drink matching the lighting style perfectly. “For you, my dear.”

Minako reached out to grab her drink and smiled. “Thank you.”

“Call me Lala, sweetie.”

Well, she liked Lala. Not only for her playful spirit, her kind personality, but for the fact that she had kept Akihiko's trust for as long as the two had known each other. She hoped it continued to last.

"Minako?!"

An empty glass hit the counter beside her loud enough for her to turn to the sound. She had very little time to register it was a *human* before said human barreled into her. "K-Ken?"

He had done some serious growing over the years, but he still looked so young, even more so with the growth on his face. It made her insides hurt because of the images it brought back to her mind from when he had been a child. However, Ken seemed extremely happy to see her, pushing Akihiko out of the way and coming to stand next to her in his place.

"Whatever the lady wants, I'll take care of."

Minako almost pinched his cheeks because that's what she always did when Ken acted too sweet when he was younger. Why that urge came back so strongly when it had been *years* she would never know.

"You look beautiful, Minako!" Ken even held his hand out so she could slide into the corner booth first. It was a large enough table that she felt the three of them could each have their own separate wall, but small enough that they didn't have to shout at each other just to talk. The seat was comfortable, the lighting perfecting the peaceful mood, and she was suddenly filled with joy again.

Akihiko kept to his part of the booth, but when she moved to sit directly next to him, he didn't push her away or ask her to go back to her side. Her hand found his under the table, her other hand on her drink, her head resting on his arm. Her eyes looked over the table at the not-so young child before her.

"How have you been?" The question felt odd coming off her tongue, but it was a great way for her to get the conversation going. Ken slid towards the center of the booth and lifted his drink into the air.

“Better now that I got to see you!” Minako followed his lead and took a drink with him, trying to keep a childish smile off her face. The drink tasted fruity, yet it went down very smoothly. She thought alcohol was supposed to *burn.* “When I got into town yesterday, I was hoping for the chance to be able to meet up with you.”

The sweetness lingering on her tongue made her eager for another sip of the cocktail in her glass. “The wife here with you, too?”

Ken shook his head. “Nah, she sadly would rather stay in Sapporo and work than come all the way to Tokyo with me.”

Minako could recall that they had both said they were moving to Sapporo when they got married, but she couldn’t remember for the life of her what Ken’s wife did for a living. The alcohol was thankfully killing most of her hesitation to ask her questions.

“What does she do again?”

“Besides annoy me and tell my son to tell me I need to eat more vegetables, she works in a children’s hospital as a nurse.” He took another drink. “She loves the kids at work more than she loves me, I think.”

Minako smiled at him. “She sounds like a wonderful woman. I’m happy for you.”

Ken smirked. “Seems like we both got the short end of the pole, huh?”

Akihiko was quick to come to his defense. “Maybe you shouldn’t leave your wife in a different prefecture.”

“Aha, yeah, if you knew my wife, you wouldn’t have asked her to come along.” Ken finished off his drink before he spoke back up. “You guys would have liked her, but she loves her job. I sure as hell wouldn’t force her to come just because I’m here for a bit.”

“How long are you in town for?” she asked. Ken spared a quick glance to Akihiko, which made her curious, but she didn’t voice her thought.

“Not sure for now. I’m here on business, possibly looking at a new job.”

There was some level of secrecy happening between Ken and Akihiko, but what that was, she wouldn’t know. She decided to change the topic all together. “How old is your son?”

“He’s going to be fourteen in a few months.” He started to move towards the end of the booth. “He’s getting too big for my tastes.”

She squeezed Akihiko’s hand under the table. “I know how you feel.”

“Do you want another one?”

Minako tilted her head up to Akihiko, as if to ask for permission, but he shrugged his shoulders. “That’s up to you, but I’ll cut you off if you start making a scene.”

She slapped him on the chest while Ken chuckled where he stood. “Noted. A few shots for Minako and myself and nothing for you, Sanada.”

Minako lost count of how many drinks she had, how many stories she told Ken of both Sae and Makoto when they had been kids, how many stories she listened to about his life and their mutual fear of a childless home again. She didn’t even know she was drinking too much until she got out of her seat to get the next round and fell backwards onto Akihiko’s lap. She thought she heard Ken laugh and tell her that he would get the drinks. She also thought she felt Akihiko’s hand around her waist. It sure as hell wasn’t hers.

“You should probably call it a night after this, Minako.”

Oh yeah, she was drunk, she could tell. Not that she never had the desire to push Akihiko down under her and have her way with him, but she never *acted* on it in public. Right? No. Because she never had the *chance* to. But his voice sounded deeper than it usually did, like he had been implying that *he* wanted to do something. Or was that her imagination?

She was still sober enough to stop herself from giving in to her impulses, for now. The next drink might do her in. Regardless, she

made herself comfortable against him, letting her hands rest over where his met on her right hip. She noticed his lips lingering over her ear, and she was desperately hoping he would tell her that he was thinking the exact same thing she was…

“Last one!” The tapping of her glass on the table pulled her out of the thick haze that she didn’t want to escape from. It was hard telling herself that one: she was here for Ken and two: Akihiko had not healed quite yet and a booth would probably be a little uncomfortable for him.

It was also pretty late. She was drunk. She needed to go home and sleep before she said fuck it and test how far Akihiko would let her go in a public spot.

“You’ll have to show me around Tokyo sometime,” came Ken’s voice. “I want to send some badass pictures to the wife and tell her ‘this is what you’re missing’!”

Was Ken leaving? Why was Ken here in the first place? Business, new job, he had already told her. She needed to sleep. How many drinks had she had anyway? They were amazing. Could she have another one? Would Akihiko let her have one more? Did he know what Lala put in it? Lala? The bartender. Right. Could she ask Lala how to make it? Could she ask Lala to work here? Could she even *speak?*

“Minako.”

Her vision came back into focus, but all she saw was Ken’s smiling face. “I’m sorry for keeping you guys out late. The city has me kind of excited, so I’ve got a lot of weird energy.” Minako felt kind of bad when she saw Ken slide out from the booth and stretch out his back. “It was good to catch up with you guys. Hopefully we can meet up again while I’m still here!”

“Of course.” Akihiko shifted behind her, but then she jolted against him and he hissed loudly in her ear. She had kicked against his knee, on accident, where was she? Why was she sitting on Akihiko’s lap? Did he take her to a love hotel? Where was Makoto? Or Sae? Was she alone with him?

“I probably should have taken you home hours ago,” she heard Akihiko say as his hands fell to her shoulders. “Can you stand up?”

Oh, so they weren’t in a hotel? Damn. No, a bar. She was drunk. It came out of nowhere. Was Ken gone? Were they alone? Was the bar closed because it was so late? Why was the voice in the back of her head telling her to turn around and push Akihiko back against the seat and tell him she loved him and she didn’t want to go home and she always had a fantasy of making love to him in public…

“Minako?”

Right. They were in public. She was drunk. That drink was *so* good. Akihiko’s hands pushed on her back and she took those few seconds of soberness to rise to her feet. The world was spinning, her stomach was spinning, her mind was screaming at her, but she came to her senses a bit more when she felt a hand wrap around her own.

“Let’s get you home.”

No!

If she tried to fight him, she did a pitiful job. It seemed to take days before they both reached the door, thanks to her intoxication and his injury. Oh, she had hurt him again. If she kissed him, would he feel better?

She heard someone say something to them, Akihiko in turn said something back, then the door opened and the humidity and heat almost knocked her off her feet. The bright lights made her feel dizzy. Akihiko’s hand on her hip did nothing to help her mind focus on the task of *walking* .

He had to catch her as she tipped over, her mind telling her she was walking, but her feet were too heavy to pick up. To her delight, she landed squarely against his chest. Her hands rested on his stomach before she lifted them over his chest and onto his shoulders before pushing herself against him completely and locked her arms around his neck. He smelled nice.

“Um…w-what are you doing?”

He was so cute when he stuttered. She could feel his heartbeat. It drowned out the rest of the sounds coming from the street. The alcohol probably tuned out a lot of it, too. She rubbed her face against his shirt like she was a cat. Did she say he smelled nice? He did. He also looked really handsome tonight.

“Um, Minako…”

“I love you, Aki.” She tried really hard to look into his eyes, to keep herself in check, but she was drunk. She didn’t know any better. Plus, his scent was adding to her drunken state of mind and she *needed* to kiss him.

So she did. Full. Hard. Sloppy. He tasted like liquor. Or was that her? Probably her. Did he drink? Maybe if she kissed him long enough, he would get drunk, too? Then she could push him back into that booth because that thought was way too tantalizing *not* to entertain now.

A pair of hands on her waist pushed her back, but her head fell to his chest once her lips left his. She could hear his voice in his chest. “Well, that was nice.” She smiled against him, feeling warm and safe, even though they were not at home. “But you’re tired.”

“Will you wake me up when we get home?” That had been hard as hell to say, but she said it. His facial expression was her proof.

Then he chuckled at her. “You’re drunk, Minako.”

“Okay, so kiss me again so I’m not.”

She leaned back in his hold and she smiled at him when his eyes quickly scanned over the area. “I don’t think that’s how that works.”

“One more! Just one. Please?”

His heart was loud again. She knew he was blushing, even if the lights masked most of it. “O-One more.”

Minako pushed him into her and made that kiss *count.* Drunk or not,

she would always love the way he made her feel, loved the way he let her know that he loved her, and maybe she wouldn't suffer from a hangover in the morning because she was only drunk off of *him* .

But no matter how hard she tried to stay awake once they returned home, the second her back hit the bed, she passed out.

Somewhere in her dreams, Akihiko laughed, pulled the blankets over both of them, and let her rest against him.

Chapter 53

Chapter 53

It had been a long few days.

Ryuji had been loudly exclaiming how badly he wanted to find a new target. He didn't ask to hang out unless it was to head to Mementos or do some digging on a possible lead.

Mishima had been blowing up his phone with requests, so much so that he had to spend several minutes scrolling up to the first name just to pass on the message to the group.

Ann had been in a weird mood. She mentioned under her breath that Shiho was going to transfer schools because of the pressure still looming over her head about Kamoshida. But then the next second, she was grabbing his arm and ushering him down to the nearest crepe station for a "snack." Only to have her stop midway through her dessert and ask him if she was getting "chubby" …

He would never figure Yusuke out for as long as he lived. Between his depression over a lack of artistic abilities, his random spurts of energy, a desire to people watch, and his odd banter, the only thing he could always depend on Yusuke to be was *hungry* .

Then there was Makoto, who was strangely avoiding him. She had been quiet the other day when they went to Mementos to take care of whoever wanted to arrest her friend, but they came up empty handed since she didn't want to divulge a name. He felt bad, assuming this person was close to her, but she had said very little to him since that trip. He tried to reach out to her once, ask her to go hang out with him after school, to which she declined, and his ego was still bruised and healing.

However, things took a dramatic turn when he decided to spend an evening talking with the fortune teller in Shinjuku.

Ren had met Chihaya on a random trip led by Ryuji and Mishima

shortly after Sojiro had given him a key to the store in case Ren was out late. They had wanted to go check out Tokyo's infamous "Red Light District," and Ren (stupidly enough) thought it would be cool. He didn't realize that "Red Light District" was slang for *criminal alley* or *yakuza street* , but there were a few stores he meandered into after failing to warn Ryuji and Mishima to stay out of trouble.

Which was when he met the fortune teller. She piqued his interest when she "sensed" he would bring some sort of *change* to the world, but he knew better than to buy into her antics. However, not wanting to meet back up with his friends and not wanting to get caught in the wrong part of the district made him sit down and talk to her.

He had been vaguely intrigued by her reading, so he visited her a few more times, bought that pricey and cheap knock-off rock, then found out she had been in some kind of trouble. With nothing else to occupy his time, he chose to spend that night talking to her about her past, the creepy man who "saved" her, and he offered to do what he could to help.

Ren worried he was going to miss his curfew when he realized how late he had stayed out, but Sojiro had been easier on him the past few days, so he doubted he would have said anything. He *did* give him a key, and he knew the barista didn't keep the business open past ten anyway. At the latest. But even though he was scared that maybe Sojiro was waiting for him to return, something caught his attention on the run back to the station that brought him to a blinding halt.

He saw Minako fall into Sanada, kind of like she tripped, which didn't bother him at all. It was weird seeing the two of them together in that area of the city that late at night, but it wasn't his place to tell anyone how to spend their evenings.

But then she *kissed* him, out in the street, and Ren almost fell back on his feet. He was so surprised by it that Morgana popped his head out of his bag and asked him what had happened.

It wasn't his business. He knew better than to get involved in the personal lives of those he didn't really know well. But…he couldn't help it. Was Minako cheating on her husband with Sanada? Was

that why Makoto had been acting so weird? Was *that* why she was being so distant, because Minako's husband was the one who was *pissed* and Makoto was caught somewhere in the middle of it all?

He almost chalked it up to a tired/drunk/whatever else it could have been kind of accident, until she kissed him again.

Morgana gasped from his spot over his shoulder. "Oh, man! Guess you got your dirt on him after all!"

He quickly turned around and took the *long* way back to the station. Sojiro was not waiting for him when he returned, thankfully, and he was able to rush up the stairs and onto his bed before the cops showed up and demanded him to explain where he had been for the last few hours.

His feline roommate found his behavior odd enough. "You're acting really weird about this, Ren." The cat then started chuckling. "Did you have a crush on that woman?"

"What?" Ren sat up in his bed. "I don't have a crush on her."

Morgana's eyes lit up in amusement. "Then why are you so upset?"

He took a deep breath, told himself he could trust Morgana, then threw his hands over his face. "Because maybe this is why Makoto is upset." When Morgana was silent, he continued to speak out loud. "Minako obviously cares about Makoto. She told me a while back that she was *married* . What if she is Makoto's step-mom or someone like it and now Minako's pissing off her husband because she's sneaking out to be with Sanada?"

"That's a pretty big web of drama."

"Yeah, and Makoto's the one who is suffering for it." He fell back onto the bed, narrowly missing smacking his head into the wall. "You remember that day she asked us to help her before someone had Sanada arrested? What if this husband has a daughter and *she's* the one Makoto wants us to change? Or what if *Sanada* is married and *his* wife is the one who's pissed off and wants to frame him?"

Morgana sighed before he jumped up onto the bed. "And what if

you're overthinking this?" The cat cut off his reply when he landed on his chest. "Ren, you're worried, I get that, but this isn't anything that you really need to concern yourself with."

"Makoto is my friend, Morgana," he said, sitting up enough that the cat fell by his side. "And she's upset right now. I want to know why."

Morgana lowered himself to sit on the bed, his tail flopping slowly behind him. "Yeah, I know, but maybe she doesn't want you to know. Give her some space. If she wants to talk, then you can listen. But you forcing yourself into her problems won't fix anything."

He knew Morgana was right, but that didn't make his words any easier to swallow. When he saw someone hurting, he wanted to help. Especially a friend. Makoto had helped him. She had reached out to him. Had Makoto heeded Morgana's current advice the day the two of them first met, she never would have spoken to him and things may be very different now.

Like they really could have been any worse.

He managed to get a nice five hours of undisturbed sleep before the annoying blare of his alarm woke him up. He was more sluggish to get ready for school than usual, but a nice cup of Leblanc coffee perked him right up.

"Maybe you shouldn't be out so late with your *girlfriend* and get some sleep for once." Sojiro waved his hand while Ren lowered his burning face towards his curry breakfast. "Ah, to be young again."

He was curious to know what girl Sojiro figured was his "girlfriend", but then he was too terrified to ask. That and Sojiro didn't take Makoto's presence so well the other day when he had brought her over to unveil Kaneshiro's treasure. Sojiro had acted like he had known someone that looked like Makoto, or shared her name, but Ren never questioned either of them about it.

Still, Makoto wasn't his girlfriend. Probably never would be. She probably didn't even want to be. It was harder to admit than he thought.

He dinked around on his phone while he waited for the train at Shibuya Station. He felt Morgana push his head into his back, something the cat often did when a friend was approaching from behind.

Except when he turned around, he didn't meet a friend. "Good morning, Amamiya-kun."

Akechi.

Ren had learned long ago not to trust him. Morgana warned him as much, as the teen detective had been able to hear his voice while they had taken that trip to the TV station. Between that and the fact that Akechi had personally vowed to bring his team to justice, he would have rather ignored him all together.

Pity he wasn't very good at being rude. "Good morning."

There was a conversation around them about *the Phantom Thieves* and Akechi lifted a hand to his head. "These Phantom Thieves are quite troublesome, don't you agree?"

Ren shrugged his shoulders instead of giving him a verbal answer. Morgana, however, prodded him to do otherwise. "I still think that what they are doing is noble."

Akechi furrowed his brow and lowered his hand. "Noble? They're taking the law into their own hands."

"Kamoshida had been hurting people at the school for over a year and no one seemed interested in bringing him to justice." Ren turned to face Akechi fully. "They might be taking the law into their own hands, but the cops didn't care until the Phantom Thieves brought him down."

The other teen sighed heavily. "This is true, but sad at the same time. I had heard that one cop was making impressive headway, until he pummeled the life out of Kamoshida."

Ren took a moment to analyze the undertone in Akechi's voice. He didn't question it, lest he trigger something in Akechi's mind. "Oh?"

“And then I heard the same cop rushes into a club and pummels innocent workers because they wouldn’t let him in with minors.”

He felt Morgana rub against his back, but Akechi’s half-grin did not go unnoticed by Ren. “I have no idea what you’re trying to say.”

Akechi waved his hand dismissively. “I hate it when people tell me that people are above the law and that excuses one or two criminal actions. That’s all I’m saying.”

Was Akechi trying to bait him into speaking in Sanada’s defense? Is that what people really thought happened when they had stormed into Kaneshiro’s club? But if Ren did say something to contradict him, Akechi would likely assume that he was a Phantom Thief and maybe even assume Sanada was as well since they both had a personal connection to Kamoshida *and* Kaneshiro.

He was grateful for the subway speakers that roared to life announcing the arrival of his train. He pulled his bag higher on his shoulder and gave a light bow to Akechi. “Then I wish you the best of luck capturing them and delivering proper justice.”

Akechi smiled and nodded his head. “A pleasure speaking with you again, Amamiya-kun.”

The young detective walked away, sparing Ren the chance to roll his eyes and say something smart back to him. If Akechi kept trying to pry him for his thoughts on the Phantom Thieves, he was going to eventually tell him they were bad guys just to get him off his back.

He sure as hell didn’t expect Akechi to mention Sanada to lure him into the conversation. What the hell was this going to mean for the future?

“Well played, Ren,” he heard Morgana tell him. “I hope he’s not figuring you out.”

He hoped not either. Especially since he still hadn’t been able to figure out *why* Akechi could hear Morgana that day…

It was incredibly difficult to focus in class. His phone kept beeping in his pocket. Messages from Ryuji flooded his phone, asking (*again*)

if they could investigate someone or go to Mementos and beat up some monsters. Things got a little less irritating when the group chat came to life (thanks to Ann) about the approaching firework festival.

A: I'm so excited you guys! I've never actually gone to the fireworks festival before!

Y: It will truly be an inspiration for my art.

R: We should totally set up early and hang out by the river so we have a good spot to see them!

A: We still have to go to class, Ryuji!

Y: A pity.

A: But we should go right after school!

Y: I would prefer time to dress appropriately for the occasion. Yukatas are a must for a festival.

A: Maybe we can change at school and go from there?

R: Yaaaaaaaah!

M: Shouldn't you all be paying attention in class?

Ren suddenly felt like Makoto was sitting behind him and ready to strangle him with piano wire for not being a good student. But then his heart became heavy again. Morgana, sensing his sudden mood swing, swiped his tail over his leg to get his attention.

"Maybe you should ask Makoto to be your date or something. I would ask Lady Ann to go with me!"

Ann giggled softly in front of him and Ren pushed Morgana farther into his desk. The blonde turned over her shoulder when Ms. Chuno faced the chalkboard.

"I think you should, too," she whispered quickly before directing her attention back to the front of the room.

“Does she like flowers? Maybe you should get her some flowers and ask her.”

He planted his elbows on the desk as gently as he could and covered his mouth with both hands. “Stop it.”

Morgana’s tail hit him in the leg again. “Come on, Ren! You’re a charming guy! Give her some flowers and I’m sure she will say yes!”

“I don’t think she’s a flower person,” Ann said over her shoulder again. She offered a wink and turned back around.

Ren grumbled into his hands. “Look, she doesn’t like me, okay? I get it. We can all go as friends and keep things from being too uncomfortable.”

“Joker takes risks,” Morgana replied, his voice becoming sad. “Have some more confidence!”

Ren chose to ignore both Ann and Morgana, focusing on the lesson instead. His phone went off a few more times, but he chose to ignore it. When the last bell rang, he quickly gathered up his things, tossed Morgana into his bag, and stood up from his desk.

“Hey, Ren, don’t be so upset.” Ann walked with him to the classroom door. “I can try and talk to her, maybe see if she does like you so we can finally put an end to the debate once and for all.”

He sighed heavily. “If you find out, don’t tell me.” He pushed open the door. “I’d rather not know.”

Ann took off in a separate direction, but he, unfortunately, came face to face with Ryuji. “Dude, did you get my messages?”

Ren didn’t even pull out his phone. “Yeah, and I chose to ignore them.”

“C’mon man. We need a target soon or I’m gonna lose my effin’ mind!”

As much as he didn’t want to rush into a new problem, he also couldn’t keep Ryuji restrained for too much longer. If he started

going off the rails, who knew what the consequences would be? However, the only thing that came to his mind was the drama he told himself to stay out of. But, if it produced a target, would it all have been worth it?

If it made Makoto feel better, then yes, it would.

“Can I ask you something then?”

Ryuji’s eyes grew wide with excitement and Ren ushered him back to their usual meeting place by the second-floor stairwell. “You know somethin’?!”

Ren did a quick scan of the area, then placed his hands into his pockets. “Until we know for a fact, I don’t want you saying anything to anyone. Okay?”

His friend leaned back against the wall, one leg raised to support his posture. “You can trust me, Ren!”

He took a deep breath. “Do you know if Sanada is married?”

It took Ryuji several seconds to register his question, but then the teen’s head smacked into the wall. “Dude, the hell? You think *Sanada* has a palace?”

“No,” he replied, his hands tightening into fists to help him power through his decision. “There’s just a lot of stuff happening around him and I think someone wants to hurt him. I think *they* might have the palace.”

There was a flash of anger in Ryuji’s eyes and Ren immediately regretted saying anything at all. “Oh, hell no! Uh-uh. Not on my watch!”

“I just need to know if he’s married or if he has a girlfriend or *any* kind of relationship.”

“Not to my knowledge, no,” came Ryuji’s response. The blond tilted his head to the side, thinking. “Doesn’t strike me as the type, to be honest. Cares way too much about way too many people.”

“Have you noticed a ring on his finger or anything?”

Ryuji shook his head. “I mean, I guess I can keep my eye on something in the future. Always wears gloves, though. But I’ll look.”

Ren lifted his hands and pushed Ryuji against the wall. “No. Don’t act out of character. If he knows I’m snooping around, he’s probably going to get pissed.”

His friend laughed at him. “Dude, if I asked him if he was married or had a girlfriend, he would probably tell me. He ain’t gonna get mad!”

Ren wasn’t willing to take that chance in case it came back to bite him in the ass. “You remember that woman who came to meet him at the hospital when he was shot?”

Ryuji gaped at him. “You think *she’s* the girlfriend?”

“Keep your voice down.” Ren stepped closer to him and lowered his voice. “She came into the beef bowl shop when I was working. She told me she was married, but she didn’t say to him. Plus, they don’t have the same last name. But then I saw her *kissing* him last night in Shinjuku.”

He was pretty sure Ryuji was going to fall down the stairs. “W-What?”

Ren held his hands up. “I’m not trying to judge him, or her, but if she’s cheating on her husband with him, it could very easily lead to someone either popping up in Mementos or forming a palace.”

“Oh…hell…” Ryuji then shook his head to the point Ren feared his head would fly off. “No. That ain’t true man. He wouldn’t do that. Maybe that girl is married to him.”

“Ryuji, that doesn’t make sense.”

“He ain’t the type!”

Ren opted to let his friend calm down for a moment or two. But, regardless of what Ryuji wanted to believe, he *saw* what he saw. Unless there was some reason both Minako and Sanada were trying

to be covert about their marriage…

Because if they *were* married, who was Makoto so worried would put the blame on Sanada about something that he hadn't even done? Akechi, maybe? But Makoto referred to a *her* …

"Excuse me."

Both Ren and Ryuji turned to who had called out to them, but impressively enough, Ren had never met the guy. He was definitely not a student, but how he had managed to walk into a school at the end of the day without having a reason was beyond him. Maybe he was a parent looking for a student?

"Can we help you?"

Ren should have spoken first. Ryuji's tone rubbed the man the wrong way. However, with a quick wave of a hand, his expression became much softer. "I'm sorry to bother you boys. I'm trying to find the principal's office, but all I'm doing is finding a thousand other rooms instead."

"Down the hall, man, first door on the left."

Ren decided he needed to give Ryuji some time, so he lifted his bag and turned to the new face. "My friend here has had a long day. I can show you the way. It's not far."

Before he could take a step, Ryuji grabbed his arm. "Look man, ain't no way Sanada is goin' after someone else's chick, okay? He ain't like that."

He nodded his head and Ryuji released his arm and turned his attention to his phone. Ren did his best to offer a warm smile to the man who simply stared at them in confusion. "Uh, sorry about that." His hands found their way into his pockets again, but Morgana was unable to sit still in his bag. At first, Ren thought he was trying to get comfortable, but eventually he realized that he was trying to tell Ren to *speak* .

"So, are you trying to get your kids into the school?"

He looked over at Ren, but there was something swimming in his bright brown eyes that threw him off balance. Was he *studying* him? Was this guy a bad guy? Was that why Morgana was being so restless?

He had a nice smile at least and seemed friendly enough, but Ren kept his guard up. “No, actually. I’m supposed to start teaching Monday. I came to get my keys, but I figured the principal’s office would be on the first floor.”

Oh, great. If this guy was bad news, how was Ren going to handle him being in their school? Ren tried to keep his doubts off his face in case this guy was good at reading reactions. “Oh, well then, welcome.”

They couldn’t reach the office fast enough, but when they finally did, Ren bowed deeply to the man before adding, “I hope you enjoy the school.”

“Ah, thank you, um…”

If he told him his name, would that come back to bite him, too? It sure as hell would if he lied to him. “Ren…Amamiya.”

The man then surprised him and bowed to him. “Thank you for your assistance, Amamiya-kun. I hope all the students here are as kind as you.”

He almost left it at that, but he wanted to know *his* name. “What classes are you teaching…Sensei?”

The man laughed and he looked several years younger. “Ken Amada. Sensei sounds weird. Most of the students at my last job called me Mr. A. And I’ll be teaching health science, since that’s right down my alley.”

Morgana knocked his head into his back again, but Ren didn’t know what else to say. Plus, Amada had to meet with the principal, so it would be rude to keep him. “I look forward to taking your class in the future, Amada-san.”

The brown-haired man nodded to him and Ren turned and walked

down the hall before Morgana pushed a disc out from his spine. He managed to get out by the vending machines before he tossed his bag out of the closest window he could find.

“What the hell is your problem?”

Morgana pushed his head out from the bag, but did not hop out onto the table. “Ren, that guy has the power, too!”

Suddenly, he wished that Ryuji’s cold demeanor would have worked its magic so his list of interesting things wouldn’t have gotten any *longer* .

Chapter 54

Chapter 54

She had so many problems on her plate that she didn't even know where to begin.

Sis clearly needed the most attention, but Makoto had no idea how to go about asking the right people to help. She was fairly sure that Ren and the others knew something was going on with her, but no one had the heart to ask for more details. She was grateful, yet somewhat saddened by it. Shouldn't she be able to trust her friends? After they had accepted her, cleared the air with their past mistakes, she *still* couldn't be forthcoming with them.

She was very nervous when she received a text from Ann that morning asking her if she could speak to her after class that day. Makoto hoped that it was only for girl talk and *not* about her withholding information, but she knew if she declined or ignored her, more questions would arise.

So she waited in the student council room for what felt like hours, all of her problems spinning over in her mind and making her sick. Sis was on a warpath and had to be stopped before she tore the family apart for good. Was that her intention? Why would she want to do that? Was she *that* angry at their father that she didn't care who she hurt in the process?

Aside from Sae hunting for blood, she was also hunting for *them* . The Phantom Thieves. Makoto had never been a good liar. Sae could sniff out her fear and nervousness like she was a snake hunting for its prey. But if she couldn't talk about her sister and her recently discovered *palace* to her friends, then who was she going to talk to? Her parents? But…would her dad ask her to turn herself in too, since technically the cops were looking for her as well?

Makoto hesitated, but she decided to wait until after her talk with Ann to contact Mitsuru. She was her only option at this point. Mitsuru was aware of the Metaverse, but she didn't think that she

was aware that having a persona and being a Phantom Thief were one in the same. Well, maybe not, if Mitsuru had one and her *dad* had one…at one point. Did they ever go away? Who else had this power?

A guy in a black mask…

She really needed to stop thinking so much. All it ever did for her was make her circle back around, leave her feeling lost and helpless, and only bring up more questions without answers.

Makoto was extremely thankful for Ann popping her head into the room the next minute. “Heya!”

She smiled at the younger girl, hoping to erase any trace of her worrying from her face. “Come in.”

Ann was a bubbly kind of energy and it made Makoto slightly jealous. The blonde pulled out a chair directly in front of her, but not once did she drop her flashing smile. Something echoed in Makoto’s mind, telling her they were *friends* now, and she wasn’t going to do anything to purposely hurt her.

“Are you excited about the fireworks festival this weekend?”

Even her voice was filled with happiness. Ann was beautiful, had that aura about her that most men would be attracted to, and she was full of life and kindness. It was far too late in her life to try and ask Ann for lessons on how to be *happy* , how to stop letting tiny things *bother* her, but it was at least nice to see.

“I’ve never been to one before.” Makoto had told herself she was a terrible liar, but here she was, *lying* without batting an eye. She had only been to one, when Sae was still *kind* and *nice* and *loving* . Makoto had been young, maybe four or five, but she screamed and cried like a baby for her dad to take her and her sister to see the Sky Flowers. He actually did take them, but he had kept his distance, enough to know where they both were while letting them do their own thing.

She remembered Sae holding her hand to keep her next to her as

the crowds gathered around them. She remembered Sae buying her a candied banana (their dad had given them some money) because she saw Buchimaru on the canopy and *demanded* one. She remembered Sae playing games with her at a few stands and handing Makoto whatever prize she had won (Sis was really good).

She remembered Sae holding her close when the first firework exploded in the sky, a flowering array of blues, purples, yellows, but the *boom* shook Makoto to her core. She remembered Sae whispering that it was okay, she would keep her safe, the noises weren't going to hurt her. Even after Makoto continued to scream and cry because the loud bangs were scaring her, Sae never let her go, got annoyed with her, told her to *grow up* .

It was also the first (and only) time that her dad picked her up in public and he took them both back home.

"You okay?"

Makoto had since had a phobia of loud noises, particularly thunder. But Sis had always been there for her. Sis would come in and check on her in her room when a storm came through and Makoto was trying to be strong like Dad. Sis would always tell her it was okay and they would make pillow forts with bedsheets and bring in all her Buchimaru toys so they weren't afraid, too.

But she'll never forget how loud Sae's bedroom door slammed shut the day she told their father that she *hated* him.

"Makoto?"

"S-Sorry…" Okay, maybe she wasn't a good liar. "Are you excited?"

Ann gave her a look for a few seconds, but then a big smile cut through the tension. "Of course! But you know," she added with a tone in her voice that made Makoto fall back in her chair. Ann's blue eyes narrowed with a question that Makoto was sure she didn't want to answer. "Most people go to these kinds of festivals with someone they like."

"O-Oh…" What was she trying to say? That Ann needed her help to

convince Ren to go with her? Weren't they already dating? Or was she here to rub that in her face? No, because Makoto may have had a *tiny* crush on Ren, but she wouldn't have had time for him, nor would she have been able to be the kind of person he deserved to be with. She had accepted that a long time ago.

"So…who would you go with?"

This kind of conversation was odd to have with someone who was *not* her mother. She still felt a pressure on her chest that she would have had if her mom had asked, but there was something more *relieving* having the discussion with a friend. "I thought we would all go as friends."

Ann's hand rested under her chin, but there was a sparkle in her eyes that caught Makoto off guard. "You wouldn't want to go with anyone *special?* "

Now she was starting to get uncomfortable. "Um, you are all special."

Her answer seemed to irritate Ann. "C'mon, there's not a *boy* you would want to go with?"

What was she supposed to say to *that?* Why couldn't they all go as friends and just enjoy each other's company that way? "No. Not really."

Her tone came across more sharp and blunt than she intended, and it was evident on Ann's face. The younger girl lost most, if not all, of her previous energy. Makoto felt a lump build up in her throat.

"What if someone asked you to go with him? Would you say yes?"

She couldn't contain her question this time around. "Why are you asking me this?"

Some of Ann's light came back to her face. "Because rumor has it, someone really wants to ask you. He just doesn't know how."

Despite herself, Makoto released her breath in a short laugh. "I doubt that."

“I’m *serious!”*

Ann looked like she meant it, but Makoto didn’t have the heart necessary to ask *who* it was. Not that if she did ask, Ann would likely come right out and tell her. Probably some creep, or weird freshman. “I don’t want to go with anyone or I wouldn’t be able to go with all of you.”

That was when Ann smirked and her eyes sparkled. “What if he was already going with us?”

Makoto remained adamant, while slightly more curious, and shook her head. “I only want to go as friends.” Ryuji? Did *Ryuji* like her? Maybe something clicked in him when he realized her dad meant a lot to her too? It sure as hell wasn’t Yusuke, and she knew better than to believe it was Ren.

Ann’s dramatic sigh made her heart fall into her stomach. “Fine. Fine. I won’t push it anymore.” Her sad expression *almost* made Makoto change her mind. “But if you ever need to talk shop about boys, let me know! Or anything else. We’re friends now! You can trust me with whatever you want!”

It was the hardest “thank you” she ever had to say, and when Ann finally left the room, she was half-tempted to shoot her a text and ask her to come back. Instead, she pulled out her phone and searched through her short list of contacts for Mitsuru’s number.

She *really* needed to talk to someone before she lost her sister, her family, *and* her friends.

Mitsuru responded surprisingly quickly, telling her that she would meet her closer to home where they could talk. Makoto arrived at the suggested location across from Ebisu Station and tried to gather her thoughts. It was a little harder to do with the smell of food lingering in the air, as she hadn’t been able to settle her stomach enough to eat all day. Maybe she would feel better if they ate?

She found herself walking around in a giant circle to ease her stress. She *had* to tell Mitsuru about Sae, but did she have to mention her having a palace? If she did, would Mitsuru be able to put two and

two together and realize that she was a member of the Phantom Thieves? And on the off-chance Mitsuru didn't mind, how would she *help?*

Her phone buzzed in her pocket and she quickly retrieved it. However, it wasn't the expected message from Mitsuru.

Can we talk?

It was from Ren.

But what on earth would he want to talk about hours after school had ended? Why was he waiting until now to say something? Why was she trying to come up with elaborate excuses to tell him *no?* Why did this day keep getting *worse?*

Before she could get her fingers to type out a single word, another message, this time from Mitsuru, dropped down over the open message. She quickly turned to that conversation, telling herself she would be in a better mindset to talk to Ren if she got a huge weight off of her chest first. Knowing Mitsuru was at the station, Makoto began to walk back to where she had said she had been waiting for her, hoping that when the time came, she could keep a steady heart and a clear mind.

Mitsuru approached the table she had picked, but the older woman did not sit down with her. "Have you eaten yet?"

Could she tell, or did they need a nice cover to have the conversation? "Um, n-no…but…I don't think I could."

A sad smile came to Mitsuru's face, but she nodded her head towards the building behind where she sat. "Joël Robuchon. I am ashamed to have been around this long and never been to one of his restaurants."

The name came so smoothly off her tongue, but it made the corners of Makoto's lips turn up ever so slightly. "If it makes you feel any better, I've lived here my entire life and I don't even know who that is."

Mitsuru chuckled. "He's a master of French cuisine, but I should

have known he would have a restaurant in a city as large and diverse as Tokyo."

Makoto also didn't want to admit that she likely wouldn't be able to *afford* a meal if Mitsuru took her inside a fancy establishment. "I-I'm kind of…not hungry."

"Let's pick up something from the café. We can come back and try his main restaurant a bit later."

Makoto could agree to that, so they both stepped inside the large brick building and took the escalator down to the basement floor. The second she saw the spread of baked goods, cakes, and sandwiches, her stomach roared to life.

She could feel her face heat up when Mitsuru softly laughed beside her. "Get whatever you want."

With a *proper* meal of carbs, meat, and vegetables (as best she could get at a café anyway), both her and Mitsuru found a quiet corner of the building to set up their indoor-random picnic on a bench. She was thankful Mitsuru was quiet while Makoto took one bite, then a second, and a third of the sandwich she had purchased for her. But halfway through (it was really, *really* good), the silence began to overwhelm her.

"So, um…thank you for…for the food…"

Her eyes met Mitsuru's and she was suddenly not as hungry anymore. Not even for the melon pan she was saving for dessert.

"Why don't you tell me what's wrong?"

She wanted Mitsuru to ask, but now that she had, Makoto had no idea how to go about answering her. Her hands fell to her lap, the remainder of her meal put back in its bag and pushed to the side. But the longer she sat twiddling her fingers together, the harder the air started to push against her chest until she couldn't hold it back.

"It's Sis."

Don't cry. "Is something the matter with Sae?"

Makoto opened her mouth to say something, but the words caught in her throat. She nodded her head once while she used that time to find the strength to push through and *talk* . “She…she’s changed…”

Mitsuru was kind enough to sit closer to her, adding some level of comfort to Makoto’s spiraling mind. “Tell me what happened.”

She first told Mitsuru about the confrontation she had with her sister at the apartment. She told her how Sae had planned on drafting up a warrant to arrest her father, likely including Makoto as well, for their “supposed” role in the work of the Phantom Thieves.

Mitsuru, however, had to interrupt her. “The Phantom Thieves?”

Oh. Had she not known who they were? The look on the elder’s face begged to differ. “Um…”

“Do you know them?”

Makoto bit her bottom lip to keep from saying anything stupid without processing it first. Could she trust Mitsuru *now* about her newfound path in life? Would it help her help Sae? But…what if it blew up in her face? Not only would she lose a good and trustworthy ally, she could end up bringing trouble to her friends. All because she couldn’t reach her sister anymore?

“You don’t need to feel hesitant, Makoto.” Mitsuru brushed some of her hair back behind her shoulder. “I won’t ask you to divulge any information you do not wish to share. So, continue telling me about your sister.”

Makoto worried she couldn’t do one without doing the other. “I don’t know what I can do to help her now.” Her vision began to blur. “She hates Dad so much, but she’s never acted out like this. And…I’m scared…”

Her nails scratched against the skin around her wrists, then she swallowed her fear and took a deep breath. “She…she has a palace…”

Mitsuru leaned back in confusion. “A palace?”

Makoto regretted saying it, but now that it was out in the open, she couldn't stop the words from flying off her tongue. "If you have the Metaverse app open and you say a name, it can tell you if they have a palace or not."

"I'm…confused by your usage of the word *palace* , Makoto."

"It's a distortion of the person who owns it because their desires got so out of control and Sis has one because I wasn't there for her and…and…"

A hand landed on top of hers, but her eyes remained downcast to avoid showing Mitsuru her tears. Even though she probably already knew from her cracking voice that she was crying.

"Makoto, I know that you know this as well, but your sister is not a bad person." Makoto lifted her eyes, not her head, but her hair offered a small and thin curtain to hide behind. "I can only imagine the kind of stress she's going through right now with her job, and I am confident that she's only venting and means no ill-will towards you or your father."

"But…she has a *palace."*

Mitsuru's hand tightened over hers. It helped her calm down a little. "I'm sure that doesn't make her evil."

"Kaneshiro had a palace, too!"

Makoto slapped a hand over her mouth and the world around her faded away. Did she really say that out loud? Why couldn't she just leave the conversation as it was? Now Mitsuru was going to make that connection and she was going to get in trouble and her friends were going to get in trouble…

"You told the Phantom Thieves about Kaneshiro?"

Oh god, what was going to happen now? There was a slight edge to Mitsuru's voice, one that made the freezing temperature drop another fifty degrees. She could feel the frigid air clamp around her throat and block all channels for air.

Mitsuru's heavy sigh nearly shattered her spirit. "Makoto, I don't know how to help you if you can't tell me what's going on."

But Makoto told herself that telling Mitsuru the truth had far too many consequences, even if she did trust her. Maybe she needed to talk to Ren and the group. Maybe she needed to talk to Sae face to face. Maybe she needed to just revert back to how she had been before, follow her sister's advice, and act like she wasn't losing everything that mattered to her.

"Would it help if I spoke to Sae myself?"

Makoto didn't know if anything would help her sister now. "I don't know."

Mitsuru released her hand, gave off another deep exhale, then pushed herself to her feet. "You should head home. Perhaps some rest will do you some good."

There was disappointment laced in her tone and it brought more tears to her eyes. "I-I'm sorry…I wasted your time…"

"You didn't waste my time," Mitsuru said with a much calmer voice. "You're a lot like your father, preferring to keep to yourself than speak to your friends. But a word of warning, Makoto, no one can wander around in the darkness alone. And if you keep quiet, no one will find you."

Makoto's only response was to nod. Mitsuru added, "You can speak to me whenever you wish. So please don't hesitate to do so."

She wiped a hand over her eyes. "T-Thank you…"

Mitsuru was kind enough to walk her to her apartment building, offered her another reminder that she would always be willing to listen to her, then she left Makoto standing by the front of the building. The weight of her unfinished dinner was much heavier than she remembered. She felt so *weak* . She couldn't trust her friends. She couldn't talk to her friends. She couldn't help her dad. She couldn't help her sister. What *could* she even do anymore besides *hurt* people despite her good intentions?

She managed to tell both her parents that she had spent the night with Mitsuru and she was just tired and couldn't answer any more of their questions. However, when she went to set her alarm on her phone before she forced herself to sleep, she saw a few unread messages. Three, exactly.

All from Ren.

1/3: I worry about you. You're being distant and quiet when I feel like you're in trouble. I want you to be able to talk to me, or to someone else, so we can help you.

2/3: I remember the first day we met. You were quiet, but really nice and I saw your smile that day. I miss that. I want to see it again. A real smile. Because then you'd be happy.

3/3: Maybe I can see a smile when we go to the fireworks festival on Saturday? :)

She cried into her pillow. He had sent those messages *hours* ago, likely a few minutes after she ignored his first one. She knew he was worried about her, and she knew she should probably talk to him about *why* she was worried, but she panicked last minute and chose not to. Maybe if she planned to talk, told him to meet her at a certain place at a certain time, she would feel more inclined to speak about her troubles.

Her phone buzzed in her hand a few minutes later. She figured she should probably reply to him to let him know she had read the messages, but then she saw the new text on her screen and her heart broke into a million pieces.

I'm sorry for bothering you. Forget I said anything.

Chapter 55

Chapter 55

He always hated being chained to a desk. But, he was back at work, the comforting environment of structure, information, and the ability to *help* again.

Akihiko was greeted by several of his old team members from Kabukicho, his newer team from Shibuya, and a handful of others as they all welcomed him back to the job. A few made comments about how he would need to pass a test again to see if he was still as sharp as he had been, to which many more sarcastic remarks came out in the open.

“You remember how to do your job?”

“Does this mean we’re gonna need to hire someone to be your personal assistant until you're healed?”

“How long are you going to be able to last behind a desk?”

It had all been in good fun, until a different kind of voice cut through the mood. “You better get used to it, or you won’t be working much longer.”

Akihiko saw many of the people around him disperse with a roll of their eyes, some offering a thumbs up in his direction, and some uttered whispers such as, “You really need to take over their job,” and, “We’re at least glad you’re back.”

But truth be told, he missed the glare of people who tried to get under his skin and failed miserably. “I’m sure you thought that when you transferred me to Shibuya.” He shifted in his seat to get more comfortable when his boss approached his desk. “Thanks for that, by the way. Hitoshi and I are great friends now.”

The man slapped his hand on his desk. “Everyone here thinks you’re an impressive person for how you’ve handled your situation,

but if you don't watch your back, Kaneshiro will be the least of your troubles."

Akihiko tried not to narrow his eyes, but he couldn't stop himself. "Planning on putting a bullet through my other knee? It might be better if you just put it through my head and call it a day."

"I see you're still as cocky as ever."

He smirked at his boss. "I've had a lot of time to work on what to say when I came back to work."

He swore he heard him growl. "The only reason you're back is because the Kirijo group would have made a scene had I denied their request."

"Yeah, that threat tends to work with people who have something to hide."

Yep. He missed this. A finger was pointed in his face with the nastiest look his boss could offer. "You better watch your back, Sanada."

Akihiko ignored the man completely and grabbed the first file on his rather small stack of paperwork. One of Kaneshiro's goons had been arrested shortly after the big-time boss turned himself in to the police. The guy had been smart enough to take a plea deal and offered up a few more names, which were all still currently being investigated.

He hoped that one of them had a broken nose and a serious gash across his face from when his glasses shattered after he punched him…

"Welcome back."

Akihiko pushed the file away to grab another one before he looked up at the voice. "I'm sure this isn't a surprise to you, keeping tabs on me and all."

Hitoshi grinned as he folded his arms over his chest. "Brass is pissed, by the way."

“Guess you should have said more nasty things about me.”

The young man sighed in a manner that made Akihiko looked back up at him. “I *couldn’t* say anything about you, not without lying, at least.”

He had to be careful, but he also wanted to believe him. Hitoshi had changed his attitude towards Akihiko over the past few months, but whether or not that was enough to make him trustworthy, he didn’t want to test. Just yet. “So I’m sure they’re pretty pissed with you, too.”

A light laugh came from his lips. “Yeah, they are. Told me I didn’t do my job well enough.” Something landed on Akihiko’s desk. A journal of some sorts. He shot a glance back up to Hitoshi, but the young man held up a hand to stop his question. “I already showed it to the brass. So, you can keep it, if you want.”

“What is it?”

“Just all my notes from following you around.” Hitoshi then lost all of his humor and sighed. “I figured it would make a decent thank you gift before I had to leave.”

Hearing this, Akihiko frowned. “Leave? Where are you going?”

Something pulled on his stomach. “I was given two weeks to find a different job, so with some help, I start another job over in Hiroshima next month.”

He was suddenly on his feet, using his desk to help support him. “Why are you leaving? Because the brass got pissed you didn’t give them what they needed to fire me?”

Hitoshi cracked a smile. “I guess you could say that.”

“Then why didn’t you?” His hands clenched on the top of his desk. “You could have easily lied to them to keep your job here.”

The young man simply waved his hand dismissively. “I thought about it. But then what does that make me? Another one of *them* . I don’t want to be like them.” He met his eyes. “I want to be like *you* .”

His admission knocked him back a step. “W-What?”

“You did what you could for the school. You didn’t let the brass stop you. You took your transfer in a positive light when it was supposed to humiliate you and piss you off. You kept in touch with those kids from Shujin even after you were told to keep your nose out of the school’s business.”

Hitoshi paused for a second, then continued on. “You asked me the first day I confronted you to watch you, to make my judgments, and I did. Through all your adversity, the negativity of people you should have been able to trust, myself included, you never once stooped to our level. You never once thought to blackmail me. All you thought about was doing what you could do for the people. *That’s* the kind of person I want to be. So, I thank you.”

Akihiko stood there in a stunned silence. A part of him felt bad for judging the kid in the light he had, but another part of him was touched. It was powerful enough to pull him back into his chair. “Didn’t expect this.”

Hitoshi chuckled and pushed his hands into his pockets. “To be honest, I wanted to hate you. So you can imagine how hard this was for me.”

Akihiko sighed slowly, his hand reaching out for the journal at the end of his desk. “I’m sorry you had to go through all of this for my sake.”

“I’m not.” Akihiko looked back up at him. “Just like you, I’m going to make the best of this. Maybe I can offer some kind of positivity on the other half of Japan.”

It was odd for him to feel so *numb* over something that wasn’t a *bad* thing. “You already have the heart for it.” He pushed himself to his feet again. “I don’t even need to wish you good luck. Seems you’re already good to go.”

They both shook hands, and it was much harder to let go as the young man took one step back and bowed deeply to him. “You’ll always have my gratitude, Sanada-san.”

He was just terrible at farewells. “Take care of yourself.” Was that something that people said?

Regardless, Hitoshi gave him one last smile before he turned his back and walked out of the building. Akihiko carefully lowered himself back down, one hand coming up to hold his head as he leaned against the desk. His eyes found the dark blue-bound notebook Hitoshi had left him, but he knew if he paused to read any of his notes, he wouldn’t be able to focus for the rest of the day.

So he spent the next few hours sifting through the papers on his desk, talking to a few coworkers who had asked about his life’s journey of the past few months, fighting back the urge to reach for the book and read at least *one* page. Had Hitoshi filled out the entire journal? How often did he have his eyes on him when he didn’t realize it?

But just as he was about to call it a day, his wrist buzzed. It freaked him out at first, completely forgetting that he wore the watch-thing, but then his mind started to race. The letters on the display told him that Ken had been the one to reach out to him, so he decided to give him a call as soon as he was out of the police station.

It was odd to use a flip-phone again, but at the same time, it was nice. Simple. Efficient. Why did kids need all those weird apps and games on their phones in extra HD or 4K or whatever was the “cool” thing? Why was texting such a big thing now? Whatever their preferences, he pulled up the second contact on his phone and called Ken.

Ken had just started teaching that same morning, but had he figured something out already? He was pretty sure that Ryuji would create some kind of scene about a replacement for Kamoshida, but hopefully nothing Ken would find Phantom Thief related.

But Ken didn’t answer. He waited a few minutes, then tried again, but got much the same result. His phone buzzed against his ear when he tried to call a third time, and he did his best to suppress a groan. Ken was one of those who would rather *text* than *call?*

I’m finishing up some schoolwork. Can’t talk. Where can I meet you?

Great. Now he had to *text him back?* A solid five or ten minutes later, he was able to reply with, *Early dinner?*

Ken's response was immediate. *Where?*

He didn't want to go back to Shinjuku and have Lala in his face about not bringing Minako back. He should probably avoid Shibuya, as that was seemingly where Amamiya and his friends liked to hang out. He couldn't ask Ken to come to Kasumigaseki in case Sae saw them together and then went after Ken as a co-conspirator.

In his silence, Ken must have grown irritated with him. *Let's go to Roppongi.*

Not an area he wanted to walk around, but he figured Ken was looking up "cool things" to do in the city. As long as he wasn't dragging Akihiko along to play the sober one so he could go bar hopping…Did Ken know the bars didn't open for another two hours?

He met Ken at Roppongi Station an hour later. He was much harder to spot than Mitsuru, but he was thankful he turned his head just in time or Ken would have gotten the jump on him. Ken seemed disappointed about it as well.

"This place is *huge!"*

The excitement in his tone left Akihiko wondering what he had been so eager to talk about. "Did you get in touch with Mitsuru?"

Ken's eyes roamed around the station, watching as the train opened its doors, filled up with passengers, then departed. "Oh, no. I only wanted to talk to you."

That struck him as odd. "Why? We should tell her, too."

But Ken shook his head. "No, trust me. This isn't business as much as it's a…friendly heads-up."

What the hell did that mean? Was Makoto in trouble at school? While Ken may not have known Makoto personally, how many other seniors at that school had her mother's eyes? But…to find Makoto on day one? Did she speak to him because she was student council

president? Had Mitsuru told Ken that while the two of them were alone with Fuuka?

There were a million different scenarios playing in his head, but Ken rushed out of the station and onto the street like he was ten and running into a Featherman movie debut. “I seriously need to convince the wife to move here. I *love* it!”

Ken whipped out his phone, taking a few pictures of the long rows of buildings, and he was pretty sure Ken snapped one with him glaring at him. “What? Gotta show the woman how cool my friends are.”

Akihiko huffed in annoyance. “Why did you want to meet with me?”

Another *click* of a camera. “Can we find someplace to eat first? Maybe have a drink? That school is *full* of drama.”

“Is that what this is about?”

Ken put his phone in his pocket and shrugged his shoulders. “Well, yes and no. Let’s go find a place to eat.”

They both settled on the first pub they found that was open so he could get something light to eat and Ken could have his drink. It served an even better location when it was practically empty inside, allowing them to sit at the farthest table in a corner.

Once everything had been placed in front of them, Akihiko couldn’t contain his curiosity. “What’s going on at Shujin?”

Ken put his drink down on the table and glanced over to the side. “I met Amamiya and Sakamoto the day I went to get my keys.”

Wonderful. They both had probably said something in passing that struck something in Ken or he wouldn’t have led with that. “I’m assuming Sakamoto did something stupid?”

“Actually, it was Amamiya that said something.” Ken’s eyes suddenly grew dark and a small grin tugged on his lips. “He said something about a woman cheating on her husband with *you* .”

Akihiko coughed on his surprise. He didn’t know whether to laugh at

the stupidity of it or to throw a punch into Amamiya's face the next time he saw the kid. "He told you this?"

Ken made a move for his drink. "Heard it while I was walking around looking for the principal's office. After reading Mitsuru's files, I wouldn't have pegged him to be a drama king."

"Who did he say the girl was?" Amamiya had seen him with Mitsuru once, but that had been weeks ago. He hadn't been with Minako in public until the other day, which would have been way past a high schooler's curfew, especially one on probation. The only other girl Amamiya would have seen him with would have been Makoto, and so help him *god* if that kid thought *they* were anything romantic…

Ken furrowed his brow in thought. "I think he said something like, 'the woman who saw him when he was in the hospital'? Sakamoto seemed to know who he was talking about."

He suddenly felt sick to his stomach. They were talking about Minako, he was sure about that now. Both boys had met her when she had first come to see him after he had been shot. Ryuji never met Mitsuru. But…how would Amamiya know she was *married* unless *she* told him? Did Minako tell him after he had told Lala the truth, or before? And while he was starting to accept that maybe hiding behind his fears wasn't so bad anymore, telling *Amamiya?* Then why didn't she tell Amamiya she was married to *him?*

The boy had to have been out that night in Shinjuku. There was no other explanation. However, despite his churning stomach, he didn't know why it mattered to Amamiya what he was doing in his personal life. He sure as hell didn't need the little punk going around telling everyone he was doing whatever he could with a married woman when that married woman was *his wife!*

"Why does he care?"

Again, Ken appeared to mull around his thoughts before he spoke them. "I heard him saying something about a palace? Mementos?" His hands scratched at the side of his head. "That's all I could recall before Sakamoto loudly came to your defense. Said you weren't the type."

Great. So in his long list of complications, he now had to deal with a teenager trying to undermine him over something that wasn't true. Why was that a go-to option for everyone that didn't like him? And how the hell would Amamiya know Minako well enough that she felt confident telling him she was married?

"Need a drink?"

He did, but he shook his head. "Don't let him start a rumor. I doubt the school cares, but if Makoto finds out, she's going to get mad and question it."

Akihiko left shortly after Ken said he would keep his eye on the situation and keep him in the loop. It didn't stop the questions, the concerns, the irritation from sinking into his mind and making him ten times more exhausted than he had been. His only source of comfort had been the notebook he held in his hand. He would have to read it as soon as he got home, or at least right before bed so he didn't dream about a nosy little teenager trying to take a cheap shot at him when he wasn't around.

What on earth had he done to piss off Amamiya enough that he had to do all of this?

"Well, you're back late today."

It was harder than he thought to bite his tongue and lift his arms when Minako gave him a light hug once he was inside the living room. "You're pretty tense, Aki."

He knew if he waited any longer, she would have cornered him about it and he may be more upset by then. That never led to anything *good* . "Did you tell Amamiya you were married?"

Minako's eyes went wide, but it was followed by an air of laughter. "I didn't tell him to who."

His hands curled into fists at his side. "When did this happen?"

"You're mad at me."

"I-I'm not mad…" He felt himself drop onto the nearest couch he

could, suddenly feeling the weight of the roller coaster of a day he had on his first day back to work. Minako chose to remain standing where she was. “I’m not mad. I was just caught off guard…is all.”

He was kind of mad at her, but it wasn’t his place to be angry when he didn’t deny it in front of Lala. He trusted Minako, so if she trusted Amamiya, as hard as it was to say at the moment, he would, too. Ken would be the one who would give him proof of Amamiya’s intentions, whether they were meant to hurt him or if it was just curiosity. It wasn’t his *business* , but he would probably be curious too if he knew Amamiya was married but saw him with a different person who didn’t share the same name.

“I didn’t tell him I was married to you.”

“Why not?”

His question caught her off guard for a second, but then she shook her head. “Because it’s none of his business.”

Her words brought a small smile to his face, something Minako noticed and she took a seat next to him. Her hands lifted the hand he held the notebook in and she pulled it from his grip. “What’s this?”

To his surprise, she didn’t open it, but gave him a questioning, yet playful, look. “It’s from someone who is getting fired because he stood up for me.”

Minako lost her hold on the notebook, but she was at least able to keep it from falling onto his knee. “Stood up for you?”

He stretched out his back and she took that as an initiative to snuggle up next to him. He didn’t stop her, even if he was slightly upset with her, and his arm dropped over her shoulders. “I haven’t heard anything official, but, he was supposed to report back to the brass about my impulsive and rash behavior while I was under investigation. I guess he didn’t do that.”

“So you’re not going to lose your job?”

His hand lowered from her shoulder to the crook of her elbow. “I

doubt it. Apparently Mitsuru threatened them with something if they didn't let me back."

He felt her fingers dance along the journal. "So what is this then?"

"It's his spy book." She laughed against his chest. He felt a little bit better. "I haven't had a chance to read it, but he showed it to my bosses as evidence. I don't think anything in here is going to be bad."

Minako's hand landed on top of his. "Of course it wouldn't be bad, because you're not a bad person."

They both sat on the couch in silence for several minutes, but eventually, Minako stirred in his arms. She sat up, letting his arm drop behind her, and rubbed at her eyes. He chuckled at her. "Looks like someone is getting too old to be staying up late."

He was rewarded with a smack to the chest. "Says the person who loves to tell me we're too old to do anything *scandalous* ."

She didn't give him time for a pitiful comeback as she threw herself from the couch and walked off into the kitchen. Feeling much too warm to think, he decided it would be best to let Minako have her space and he could store away the small gift in his desk.

He didn't need to read it now. One day. But not today. He could put it with the pictures of a better time in life, just in case he had another breakdown and Minako couldn't be there to fix him. However, the second he opened the drawer in his desk where he was going to leave the journal, he noticed something *off* . The last time had been at his desk was before he was shot, but he didn't remember leaving the file with the older pictures on the top of everything.

He almost, *almost* put it out of his mind until he opened up the file. On the top were the notes he had from his conversation with Fuuka when he was looking into Shido months ago. Why was it in the same folder as the pictures? Had Minako gone through his desk recently looking for something? One of the pictures? But she didn't know he had them there. No one did…

A sinking feeling turned into a gut-wrenching sickness when he saw Kaneshiro's name on the top of the paper, circled several times, his own doing from when he discovered Kaneshiro's first name from Ohya.

Makoto .

This had been how she found out about Kaneshiro. Minako either let her look through his things or Makoto waited until she had the room to herself so she could look into it. But *why?* Why would she need to know who Kaneshiro was and then rope Amamiya and his friends into following her? And why the hell would she have done this behind his back?

Maybe to some degree, Sae was right. It was time to get to the bottom of all of this.

Chapter 56

Chapter 56

You are an idiot for thinking Makoto liked you. One pull up.

You are an idiot for trying to throw yourself into her problems. One pull up.

You are an idiot for hoping Ann would be able to reach out to her. One pull up.

You are an idiot for feeling like a heartbroken child .

He couldn't do another pull up, so he dropped to the wooden floor and leaned back against the edge of his bed. Morgana hopped down from his desk and walked up beside him. "You couldn't do one more?"

Ren's hand swatted Morgana away, but the cat dodged him easily enough by jumping onto the bed. His arms felt light, but too heavy for him to move at the same time. He was hungry, but he thought working out would have been a better way to calm his mind.

"C'mon on, Ren, don't look so down. You'll get better!"

But never good enough, huh?

He didn't need Morgana to tell him to go to sleep that night, but just as he was about to drift off, his phone lit up in the darkness. He groaned, annoyed that someone would bother him this late, then lifted the phone so he could read the message.

Did you ask her yet?! :) <3

He was half-tempted to ignore Ann's message, but he instead replied with a simple *no* and turned his phone over to avoid the rest of the conversation.

Sadly, he couldn't do the same thing the next morning when he saw

Ann at the train station. She ran up to him, her eyebrows drawn together in a scowl, her cheeks puffed with indignation. He worried that she was more pissed off that he chose to ignore her, so he braced himself with stiff shoulders and a straight back in case she attacked him.

“Why haven’t you asked her yet?!”

That had *not* been the question he anticipated, nor had it been one of the unread questions she had tried to ask him last night. He still kept his guard up, ready to move if she snapped. “Ann, just drop it.”

“The reason she doesn’t seem interested in going with you is because *I’m* the one asking her!” Her foot stomped down loudly on the concrete platform. “You need to be the one to ask! It’s *tomorrow* , Ren!”

His head dropped to his chest and his hands went into his pockets on reflex. “Ann, I’m sorry. I’m not going to ask her. I kind of tried already and now she’s ignoring me completely.”

He should have left off the part of him *trying* because Ann lost her anger and became much more interested in the details. “Did you say, ‘Hey Makoto, will you go to the festival with me this weekend?’ Or did you say, ‘There’s a festival this weekend,’ and try and be charming about it?”

That oddly pulled a laugh from his throat. “You know me so well.”

“Ask her the *correct* way this time!”

But Ren shook his head. “I’m not going to. I don’t want to make her uncomfortable and have that ruin the day for all of us. Please. It’s fine.”

Ann made a face to let him know she wasn’t all too happy with his decision, but she didn’t comment on it any further. As soon as they both stepped off the train at Aoyama-Ichome, Ann looked over at him.

“Do you think she’s okay? I mean…she’s been pretty upset for a few days.”

Ren didn't feel comfortable disclosing his thoughts on the matter, so he shrugged his shoulders. "She seems to be the type of person who prefers to handle problems on her own."

Ann elbowed him in the side, *hard* . "This is why she doesn't like you."

Her words gave him pause. "D-Did she tell you that?" Did he just stutter?

"You need to reach out and help her, Ren!"

"I've been *trying* ." He took a second to get his emotions in check and lower his voice. "But she won't talk to me. So maybe she needs her space."

"Or maybe you're the one she's upset with."

He wanted to rebuke her statement, but by the time he figured out what he was going to say, she had walked off towards the front gates without him. He sighed heavily before following in her footsteps. Had he done something to upset Makoto so much that she just stopped talking to him? Whatever it had been, it wasn't intentional. But he would like to *know* what he had done or said. And now he *really* needed to know or Ann was never going to let him forget about it and move on.

Against every nerve in his body screaming at him not to do it, he walked up to the third floor after school had let out. He made a brief stop to talk to Ryuji in the stairwell, but he had been quiet and had little to say. Once Ren was up on the top floor, he pulled out his phone while Morgana squirmed in his bag.

"Hey, do you mind giving me some space?" His fingers danced on the screen, pulling up apps, closing out of apps, just so he could do *something* .

Morgana managed to free his head from the confines of his bag. "What do you plan on doing?"

He elbowed the cat before he lowered his bag to the ground. "I'm sure Lady Ann misses you."

Ren met Morgana's eyes as they narrowed at him, then he pushed himself out by his feet. "Fine. Keep your secrets. But I'm assuming since we're on the third floor, you're going to try and talk to Makoto. Good luck."

Ren may have thought he was being sarcastic until he rubbed his head on his leg. The next second, Morgana was down the hall and out of sight, amazing Ren once again with his ability to blend in with nothing to blend in with.

Or so he thought. "Pretty sure a cat is against the rules."

He didn't recognize the voice, so Ren quickly shifted his weight to spin around to who had spoken to him. "A-Amada-san…ah, Sensei?"

The older man folded his arms and Ren was sure he was going to get busted for good this time. "Why do you keep a cat with you?"

Think of something, think of something! "I found him this morning and he wouldn't leave me alone."

"So you carried him around in your bag?"

Shit shit shit… "I, uh," he muttered as a hand went to the back of his head. "I felt bad for him…"

Amada looked behind him, likely in the direction Morgana had taken off, but then his eyes locked with Ren's. "Can't say I'm a big fan of cats."

He bowed to the teacher. "I apologize for breaking the rules."

"Is this why you're a criminal, because you sneak cats into schools?"

So he knew about his criminal record. That shouldn't be a surprise anymore, especially given the never-ending rumors and the fact he had been teaching for almost a full week now. It still didn't make it easier to hear. "I'm sure that will be the case if you tell the principal."

Amada found his words humorous enough. "I can let it slide, I guess. This time. I would hate to be that person who gets a bad rep in his

first week of teaching."

Ren breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you, Amada-sensei."

"Stop with that *sensei* stuff. Makes me feel old."

"Sorry."

Despite being found out about carrying Morgana around with him for the day, Ren felt oddly calm around Amada. Just like he had with Sanada once he got over his fear of him being a cop. They both had personas, or at least Morgana felt like they did, and both seemed to be around the same age…

"Do you know an Akihiko Sanada?"

Amada's eyes widened at first, but then they narrowed as the question hung in the air. "Um, y-yeah. How did you know that?"

Technically he didn't until just now, but Ren didn't want to believe that this strange power extended to anyone who wanted it. Which is why he thought that maybe the two men knew each other, which meant he likely knew who that other lady with the power had been as well.

However, trying to put that into words was not something Ren had thought about before he had asked. Amada didn't seem to be willing to let his silence serve as an answer and he grew slightly uncomfortable under the elder's gaze.

"R-Ren?"

Both Ren and Amada turned to find a stunned Makoto staring at both of them. Her crimson eyes lingered on his for a brief second, but when they turned to the teacher next to him, something different came over her face.

Recognition.

Did she know him, too? It wouldn't be all that surprising since she had known Sanada and the other mysterious girl and Minako (Did Amada know her as well?) and they all seemed to be linked

somehow. But instead of smiling and greeting Amada like he would have expected her to do, she bowed her head in his direction.

“Oh. You must be the new teacher?”

Was she playing coy just because he was standing in the same area? Would Makoto have been much more comfortable had the two met without eyes around them? Why would she act distant towards someone she knew? Maybe she didn’t know him?

“Ah, yeah. Ken Amada.” Ren watched Amada give a slight bow as well. “And you are?”

It felt like a script, but it had been executed perfectly to throw him off. He never pegged Makoto to be a good actor, but she was doing a fantastic job, if that’s what was happening. “Makoto Niijima. I’m the student council president. I apologize for not making my acquaintance earlier.”

That was when Amada made some sort of connection, but sadly, he never vocalized it. “Well, it’s nice to meet you, Niijima-san.” He gave her one last look before he turned back to Ren. “Well, keep out of trouble. I need to pick up a book real quick, so I’ll see ya later.”

The air became so much more tense when Amada disappeared into the library. Not only had it been a few days since he had sent those messages to Makoto, it now appeared her list of interesting adult friends were getting longer and longer. It was hard as hell to look over at her and even harder to *move* towards her, but the pressure on his chest only intensified.

“Uh, hi.”

He sounded like an idiot, but it was all he could manage to do without stopping in front of her and saying nothing at all like a creep. Her eyes fell to the floor and studied the space between where they both stood. He figured she wasn’t going to say anything, so he placed his hands into his pockets to help hide some of his nervousness.

“Um, how are you?”

Maybe a simple question could get the ball rolling? “Oh. Um, good, I guess.”

It was a start. “You guess?”

One of her hands crossed over her stomach and gripped her other wrist. Ren noticed that her hold was rather tight. She was probably nervous, too, or desperate to get away from him. Either way, it made his heart hurt enough that it broke the tension around his throat so he could speak to her properly.

“Do you mind if I ask you something?”

The only reply he got was a quick and subtle nod of the head, so he didn’t wait for a verbal answer. “Do you think I’m annoying?”

His comment lifted her eyes so he could study her reaction, but as soon as she realized what he was doing, she dropped her head again. “Um, no.”

“You can be honest with me.”

“You’re not annoying,” she whispered, barely enough to where he could hear her. But he could keep this going, hopefully to a point where it ended with her opening up to him and him not making a fool of himself.

“So uh…how do you know Amada-san?”

It was *not* what he wanted to ask her, but he panicked last minute and it had been the most recent question to fall back on. It got her attention again at least, but Ren didn’t know if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

Makoto kept her head up this time, but her eyes were everywhere but on him. “I…I thought I saw him somewhere before.”

“He said he knew Sanada.”

She fell back on her feet. “W-What?”

Ren lifted a hand to play with the fringes of his hair. “Yeah, but I

didn't get to ask him how he knew him."

The gears in her head were turning, he could tell that much, but then her eyes lost the surprise and hardened a little too much for his liking. "I'll be sure to ask him then."

And he made himself look like a fool. He noticed Makoto reaching for the bag strap on her shoulder and he sensed that she was about to walk around him. He couldn't let her walk away, not when he finally had her talking to him and he had so much more he wanted to say…

"So…"

"I need to go, Ren."

No, no he had come this far, he had to say at least *one more thing* before he gave up completely. "Can I take you to the festival tomorrow?"

He almost threw his hand in his mouth to bite back the horrified gasp that wanted to come out of his throat. His heart was hammering away in his chest, his hands were shaking in his pockets, but he somehow managed to keep his eyes on the girl who had come to a stop beside him.

"W-What?"

Oh god he couldn't ask again. He shouldn't have asked the first time. But there was something different about her expression that seemed to steady his frantic heart and let his lungs contract so he wouldn't pass out. Despite all of that, he still had a hard time clearing his throat. "Um, can I take you to the festival tomorrow?"

The second time he asked, he thought it was to help clear away any trace of doubt she had in case she had heard him wrong the first time. However, she looked more confused now than she did before. Somewhere in the back of his heart, he braced himself for her rejection while still holding out hope that she was processing everything and needed more time.

"What happened to Ann?"

His surprise came out in the form of a laugh. “Ann?”

Makoto didn’t hesitate. “Aren’t you going with her?”

Truth be told, they were *all* supposed to go together, but it would be neat to walk around the festival and do cool things with someone who he may have wanted to see happy again. “I mean, we all were going to go, but I was more thinking we could…walk around and, maybe hang out, just you and me?”

“You’re not doing that with her?”

Her tone was more distant than he realized, but he also noted the way she held herself. She couldn’t stand still, constantly shifting her weight around on the balls of her feet. Her hands were in motion, her fingers scratching over her skin. Her eyes darted around as she kept them focused on the floor.

It hit him then what was going on. “Do you think I’m dating Ann?”

Makoto’s eyes fell closed as she exhaled a breath. Ren, however, felt a small smirk form on his face. “It’s none of my business.”

He braved poking her once in the shoulder. “Were you *jealous?* ”

His grin split his face in two when he caught a glimpse of her reddening face. “N-No.”

It was suddenly that much easier to talk to her. “Well, now that you know I’m single and I know you’re single, we should go to the festival together. It will be fun.” While the blush remained on her face, he worried she was still having reservations. “I really would like to see you smile again.”

“Even if I can’t trust you with what’s happening in my personal life?”

His mouth opened to answer her with a simple *of course* , but her expression kept the words lodged in his throat. But he knew he needed to say something quickly before she interpreted his silence the wrong way and pushed herself farther away from him.

“I want to earn your trust,” he finally said, lifting a hand to her

shoulder. A part of him was happy when she made eye contact with him, but another part was saddened by how upset she appeared to be. “And I will fight for that honor. Because I think you’re worth it.”

Her eyes widened and the blush took over the rest of her face. It was super cute, and even though he had been serious about his words, he couldn’t stop the soft breaths of laughter. “You’re really cute, too.”

“S-Stop that…” Her hands covered her face as Ren moved to stand next to her. He may still have a few barriers to tackle, but he would tackle them. He would prove to her that she deserved to be happy. He just hoped he was the one who helped her become happy again. Or if not him, he could at least be someone she could depend on.

“So,” he added, his smile lingering on his lips as he dropped an arm over her shoulder. “Are you going to wear a yukata?”

He could feel her burning face as he stood beside her. His insides grew warm, too. “A-Are you?”

“Do you want me to?”

He would have to go buy one if she said yes, but he would. He would do it in a heartbeat. “You don’t have to.”

If he saved the money he would spend on a new yukata (probably not something he could grab for cheap), he could spend it on a first date if everything went well at the festival. Compromises. “Will you?”

It came off his tongue wrong. He wanted to know *if* she was going to wear one, but it sounded like he was going to be disappointed if she said no. But it was his lucky day, for she took no offense and nodded her head. “Ann and I went out and bought some earlier in the week.”

He tried to keep his smile more on the normal side rather than too excited and eager to see what she would look like in a yukata.

Cute.

She would always be cute.

But he was willing to bet that she would be absolutely *beautiful* if he could see her smile under the streaks left behind by the fireworks.

Chapter 57

Chapter 57

Minako thought she was going to have a heart attack when the front door of the apartment slammed shut. She had been working on fixing some dinner, lost in her own mind while her phone played back some soft piano music (strangely it made her happy and a better cook). She was grateful that she had just finished cutting up the last of the vegetables or she would have likely sliced her finger off with the knife. She turned around and huffed angrily as she walked out of the kitchen to figure out who had scared her half to death, the knife in her hand a small message to let whoever know she was *not* happy about being startled while working.

And because of that, she nearly sliced Akihiko in the neck when he slammed into her as he came around the corner. It got him to jump back and lift a hand right under his jawline, so she thought that for a second she actually did cut him.

“Did…Did I cut you?”

“Why in the world are you walking around with a knife?”

She didn’t know how to respond appropriately after hearing the disapproval in his voice. She carefully placed the knife down on the counter and stepped into him, grabbed the wrist by his face, and checked for any signs of blood or a cut.

“Maybe you shouldn’t come storming into the house and freak me out.” She pulled away from him when she didn’t see anything, but she still heaved a sigh of relief. “What’s bothering you now?”

“We’re going to the fireworks festival tomorrow.”

She was glad she chose to put the knife someplace safe or she would have dropped it on her foot had she been holding it. “W-What?”

Akihiko had sounded angry when he said it, but he still *said* it. Ever since Mitsuru asked him to go to the bar and meet with her and Ken, he had been a bit different. He never wanted to do *anything* with her in public in case it came back to haunt him. Maybe Ken had said something to him that got him to finish opening his eyes. It made her feel like he was asking her out for the first time.

He must have thought the same, for after his initial raw anger simmered down, he realized what he had done. “Um, I mean, if you want to.”

She couldn’t help but laugh at how adorable he was, keeping his eyes cast off to the side, rubbing the back of his neck to try and calm his mind before he turned bright red, which he couldn’t stop anyway. She gave him a moment of silence, then wrapped both of her arms around the one he had by his side.

“Maybe you should ask me more nicely.”

He coughed into his hand to clear his throat, then asked with a more appropriate tone. “Do you want to go to the festival tomorrow?”

Ever since Akihiko had brought home a screaming Makoto from the festival years ago, Minako figured she would never get her chance to go with either of her children or with him. It wasn’t a surprise, given they didn’t go out much at all, if ever, but that *one time* had backfired in their face. She had long since given up on a second.

She considered her first (unofficial) date with Akihiko to be the time he had bravely and preciously asked her to the summer festival in high school. No matter how many years had passed since that night, she would never forget his smile, his energy, the ease in which he was able to speak to her, the way the streaks from the evening fireworks danced across his face and made him look *alive.* She had been so drawn into him, watching as he kept his eyes on the exploding lights in the sky, before she slowly reached out to take his hand.

She had been slightly disappointed since she forgot he wore gloves all the damn time, but it passed when he looked down at her, smiled, and squeezed her hand.

It may have been childish now, but she was so happy with the news he was wanting to take her out again that she felt a few tears coming to her eyes. “I would love to go with you.”

It was nice, being able to lean up against him, enjoy the weight of his arms around her shoulders, and not have to worry about anything. In that moment, nothing mattered more to her than *him* . Through the hell they had made together, been pushed into, had yet to face, he wasn’t going anywhere. No matter if Makoto was getting herself into trouble. No matter if Sae seriously planned to arrest both Makoto and Akihiko just to watch them suffer. No matter what Mitsuru was asking of Akihiko and Ken and who knows who else.

They would always be together.

The atmosphere changed drastically when Makoto stepped into the apartment. Minako could practically feel the building fire raging inside Akihiko before he pulled away from her. She managed to grab his hand and met his eyes with a cold, hard look.

He knew what it meant. And something poked at her heart when he scowled at her and walked off to their room instead of greeting their daughter. Makoto’s eyes followed him as he disappeared from view before she turned them on her.

“I-Is he okay?”

Minako sighed heavily and shook her head. “He’s still struggling to accept desk duty at work.” She didn’t know for a fact if that was true, but she knew Akihiko well enough to know that he was not one to enjoy being strapped to a chair when he could be out in the world *doing* something. “He’s probably still in a little bit of pain, too.” Minako quickly added, “But don’t worry, honey. He seems to be moving around just fine.”

Makoto’s head fell to her chest, but before Minako could try and think of something else to say to change the subject, her daughter looked back up at her. “C-Can I ask you something?”

There was something about the tone in her voice and the expression on her face that made it impossible to tell what Makoto was going to

ask. “Of course.” But at least she was willing to speak to her. She counted that as a win.

“Um…” Makoto held her hands together in front of her, but Minako relaxed slightly when she noticed the light blush spreading across her face. “I…I’m supposed to go to the festival tomorrow…”

Minako’s first thought was one of pure joy. Had Makoto been asked by someone (she thought she knew *who)* and they were going to go together? Would it be their first date? Is that why Akihiko *demanded* to go, because somehow he had caught wind of her going out with a *boy?*

“But I’m scared.” Makoto’s voice brought all of that to a halt. Minako and Akihiko had spent *hours* with a terrified Makoto that first and only night he had brought her home after the fireworks. She could easily see the conflicting emotions on Makoto’s face. She likely wanted to go, with said boy, but was too afraid to go and freak out and have that ruin anything for the future.

She was getting ahead of herself. “Why are you afraid?”

Makoto rubbed one of her arms with her opposite hand. “I don’t like fireworks.”

Minako took a step towards her and kept her voice quiet. “Honey, that was years ago, and there’s more to do at festivals than watch fireworks.” She smiled to herself, trapped in the past for half a minute. “You can go to game stalls, eat festival food, buy good luck trinkets, enjoy each other’s company.”

“Mom.” Makoto’s voice brought her back to the present. The face her daughter made brought a small puff of laughter into the silence. “I don’t want to go.”

“Oh, come on, Makoto,” she said, wrapping an arm over her shoulder. “I’m sure Ren will be very upset if you don’t go with him.”

Minako realized a little too late what she had said. “H-How did you know he asked me?”

She tried to play it off with another laugh. “Mom’s know these kinds

of things."

"You called him *Ren.* " Makoto shook herself out of her hold. "Did he say something to you?"

Well, no, he never mentioned Makoto specifically, but Minako also didn't want her to know she had spoken to Ren behind her back. "You talk about him quite frequently. I just put two and two together."

Makoto still appeared very upset, but then she sighed to clear the air. "Is that why Dad is mad at me?"

Truth be told, if that was the case, Minako was about to have one nice chat with him. He didn't need to follow their daughter around because he didn't trust her with a boy. Makoto was going to have to grow up. He couldn't keep her tied down forever. Plus, she liked Ren. He was a good human being. She could sense it. She would be more than happy to let him take Makoto to the festival *alone* .

"I'm sure he's just surprised," she finally said. "I'll talk to him tonight. So I want you to go, have fun, and let me know if you need me to bail you out, okay?"

She doubted her words eased Makoto's worries, but her daughter at least attempted to smile. But once Makoto had gone to bed for the night, Minako carefully closed the bedroom door and gave Akihiko a hard stare.

"Makoto doesn't need you to watch her twenty-four seven, Aki."

He continued to sit behind his desk, both hands gripping at the sides of his head. "Maybe someone should."

Minako approached him, but stopped when he turned to face her. "What's wrong?"

"Did you let her in here?"

His tone had been sharp, his eyes narrowing and his hands curling into fists on the desk. "Makoto?"

One of his fists pounded on a stack of papers. "This was how she

found out about Kaneshiro. She purposely found his name *from my notes!"*

It was hard for her mind to wrap around, but it had been a few months since Akihiko had been this angry. Instead of trying to make sense of his words, she placed her hands on each of his shoulders to calm the rage swirling in his posture. "There are probably a thousand different ways she could have found out about him."

When he groaned loudly, her fingers pushed harder into his muscles. "Aki, she's our daughter. You should trust her."

She felt like he was going to say something, but opted to throw his hands back over his face rather than speak his thoughts. So she stood in his silence, trying to work out his negativity and frustrations from his shoulders. He eventually gave in and dropped his arms to his sides and she was able to move her hand over the base of his neck and up through his hair.

"I'm really excited to go to the festival with you tomorrow." While she didn't mind the silence, it was hard to be quiet when he had been so upset. The fact that her hands were getting sore and she could still feel a tightness in his muscles clued her into that much.

However, she heard a light laugh escape his lips. "It's supposed to rain tomorrow."

Her heart fell in her chest. Did he seriously only ask her to go so they could spy on Makoto? Sadly, she didn't have the heart to ask him and it was hard to keep some level of excitement in her tone. "When have the weatherman ever been right?"

He must have caught her change in voice. "I'm sorry." He shifted slightly so he could turn to look at her. "I still want to go with you."

It hurt to end the conversation at that, but she couldn't fake her happiness any further. She could tell she had hurt him when he sat on the bed next to where she was trying to sleep, lifted his hand several times to reach out to her, but in the end, he sighed heavily and dropped his head into the pillows.

Minako rolled over once the rays of sunshine struck her face, but she was disappointed that Akihiko wasn't in the bed beside her. He had likely woken up early, if he had slept at all, and went about a less crazy morning routine before she could get out of bed. But after allowing him to drown in his insecurities over the night, she wanted to make it up to him.

She was very surprised to see Akihiko sitting on the couch, his phone in both of his hands, seemingly flipping through some article. Minako leaned against the wall and watched him for a few seconds before she grew tired of waiting for him to notice her eyes on him.

"Good morning."

His head shot up quickly at her voice, but then he gave her a growing smile that warmed her heart. "Good morning."

"What are you doing?"

Akihiko's eyes dropped back to his phone. "Well, the fireworks don't start until late, so I thought maybe we could explore that area of Tokyo while we waited."

She bit her bottom lip to keep herself from gushing over how precious he was right now. "Really?"

He glanced back up at her with a hint of concern on his face. "Um, is that okay? We don't have to if you don't want to."

"No," she whispered as she shook her head to keep her emotions in check. "That sounds wonderful."

"Ah." Another smile reached his lips. "There's a lot we could see. I know you're not much of a history buff, but Asakusa is filled with everything it seems. So maybe after lunch, we could head out?"

"I would go anywhere with you if you asked me to."

There was a small patch of pink forming over his cheeks. She couldn't help but laugh. "W-Well, go get ready and then we can go."

She wanted to push him back against the couch, or take him back to

their room first, but she decided that she could save all that for *after* the main event. Akihiko returned his attention to his phone while she walked back into their room to dress more appropriately for the occasion. She still had her yukata that she had worn that day when Akihiko had asked her to go to the festival with him, but she knew better than to believe it would fit her now. Sadly, she hadn't expected him to ever allow her to be seen with him in public and never bought a new one.

Maybe he would let her as they walked around the city.

For now, she had to settle for a more casual dress code. Not that if she owned a properly fitting yukata she would want to wear it around all day, but she would. Because she knew that Akihiko thought she was cute in one, even if he never did come right out and say it.

Not to her surprise, Akihiko was on edge as she walked next to him to the train station. She wanted to grab his hand and tell him it was going to be okay, that she was very happy to be out and about with him, but she also wanted *him* to take the initiative.

Until she noticed that he wasn't wearing his gloves. It was hard to find the strength to keep walking when it took every ounce of willpower not to start weeping like a teenage fangirl in the middle of the street.

He tensed when she stood shoulder to shoulder with him while they waited for the train to arrive at the station. But she couldn't pass up another chance to hold onto him. She weaved her fingers through his, taking a moment to cherish the fact she could feel his skin, the wedding band he chose to keep on despite the fact everyone would *know* was pleasantly warm and smooth to the touch. It brought so many emotions to the back of her eyes, but she laughed out loud to keep bystanders from noticing.

"You forgot to wear your gloves," she whispered to him, unsure if he could even hear her over the hustle on the platform. Her hand tightened over his own, hoping to communicate how much all of this had meant to her with actions rather than with words.

Akihiko remained silent, but just when Minako was about to release

his hand, he squeezed hers enough to bring her eyes up to study him. He was staring ahead, but then she could tell he knew she was looking at him and turned towards her. “W-What?”

She said nothing to him and rested her head against his shoulder, trying to stop herself from shouting, *“This is my husband and I love him so much!”* The train pulling into the station was a perfect distraction. But as they boarded, he never let her go. Her hand remained locked in his as they made their transfer and stepped out into the dreary and humid afternoon once they reached Asakusa.

It was going to rain, she knew it. It was that time of year anyway. The clouds above her looked unforgiving. However, as she watched Akihiko take in the neighborhood with child-like wonder, nothing else mattered to her. Rain, be it a sprinkle or a downpour, would not ruin this day with him. *Nothing* would.

“I can’t really say I’m all that knowledgeable about Tokyo’s history,” came Akihiko’s voice. Minako gave him a smile as he continued to scan the buildings in front of them. “But I heard that the temple was pretty popular.”

Minako lifted their linked hands into the air. “You’re okay with so many people seeing us together like this?”

He frowned before he met her eyes. “Is that not okay?”

“Aki,” she said with a laugh. “There is nothing more I want to do than to walk around with you right beside me.”

And that’s exactly what they did. They walked down Nakamise Street, stopping at several different shops, and she was unable to resist the temptation of the sugar-filled snacks. Akihiko didn’t stop her and only smirked after telling her she was going to get fat.

“Nah, I’m pretty sure I’ll work off all these calories tonight once we get home.”

It was far too easy to tease him sometimes.

They stopped by the temple, even managed to talk him into taking a picture with her like they were first time tourists to Tokyo. (They kind

of were, which was how she was able to get him to take the picture with her.) She laughed at him when he pulled the “great curse” from his lottery of omikuji while she had drawn the “great blessing.” She took his hand again once he had tied his strip of paper to the wires and continued to pull him along in their mini adventure.

She came to a stop outside the shrine. “I remember when you told me that you didn’t believe in the higher spirits.” She found herself holding him by his arm, a smile spreading across her face. “I almost laughed at you then, until you told me that I didn’t need to put my faith in a god. Because you would do everything you could to make me happy on your own.”

His opposite hand scratched the back of his neck. “I think I kind of failed in several aspects.”

Minako pulled away from him, but kept her hands around his arm. “Do you know how happy I am right now, that you’re willing to do all of this for me?”

Akihiko’s smile was forced and she felt a small tear in her heart. “I should have done this years ago.”

“You’re doing it *now* , and that’s all that matters to me.”

He looked away from her and studied the ground like it had the words that he wouldn’t be able to say. “I’m still afraid.”

Minako tugged on him until he finally looked over at her again. “Maybe now it’s my turn to be your strength. This isn’t a burden you should have to bear on your own.”

“It’s my fault.”

“Stop.” She released his arm and stood directly in front of him. “Let the world know who I am, I don’t care. If someone threatens to harm you, or our children, they have to come through me first. And you *know* how intimidating I can be when I want to be.”

He sighed heavily, but Minako thought she caught a glimpse of a smile. “I shouldn’t be ruining this day with you because of my fears.”

She didn't wait another second before she grabbed his hand and pulled him along. "Let's go find a good spot to watch the fireworks."

It was getting later, crowds of people began surrounding them, which made Akihiko grow more and more uncomfortable next to her. While she wanted to sit along the riverbank and sit snuggly next to him while the fireworks exploded in the sky directly above them, she also knew that it wasn't the scene that she needed. Just him.

The *only* reason she hesitated to tell him they didn't have to stick around had been her hope of spotting Makoto with Ren. Makoto had told her she planned on wearing a yukata and Minako had been desperate to see how *cute* the two of them would look together. But then she remembered that was likely the reason Akihiko was even out here at all.

"Let's head back home."

Akihiko came to a complete stop. "What?"

She had to push her way through the busy street to get out of everyone's path. Once they were standing next to a building, she locked eyes with his widening ones. "We don't need to stay out. I've had a lot of fun. I don't need to watch fireworks, too."

Something tugged at her heartstrings when his shoulders dropped and his head fell to his chest. He didn't say anything for the longest time, but he finally found his voice when she put her hands on his chest. "I want to share this moment with you. Please."

It was hard to keep her inner thoughts to herself. "I don't think Makoto would be too thrilled to find out you're spying on her."

He took her comment like a slap to the face. She immediately regretted saying anything at all. "Right…" She waited for him to elaborate, or to clue her in on precisely how he was feeling, but he only shook his head. "We can head back home if you want."

Her hands pushed him back against the wall of the building. "That's not what I meant, Aki. I want to see them, I do, but I know you're scared to be out with me and I don't want to be making you

miserable."

He didn't meet her eyes. "I'm not miserable."

She knew better than to try and contest him, so she settled for the next best option. "Okay, so let's compromise. Let's go somewhere away from the crowds and watch them from a distance. Is that okay?"

That pain in her chest deepened when he only nodded at her and pushed himself away from the wall. He was the first to head towards the station, and while she desperately wanted to reach out and hold his hand, she knew she had offended him.

"Minako?"

Her head shot up right before she ran into Akihiko. His hands fell to her shoulders as if he was afraid she wouldn't have stopped by his voice alone. She started to feel much worse. "Sorry."

"Minako," he added with much more sharpness in his tone. "I may have wanted to come out here originally to make sure Makoto wasn't getting into trouble. But then I saw a light in your eyes when I told you that I wanted to take you out today."

His fingers traced down her jawline to her chin and held her firmly in his hand. "You told me once before that all the suffering is worth it if you could just make me happy. I know exactly what you mean now. So come on," he said, releasing her before her tears could reach his fingers. "Let's go find somewhere to watch the fireworks. I don't care where we are."

Akihiko was the one to reach for her hand, then she held onto it as tightly as she could. Her other hand wiped at her eyes as she squeaked out a pathetic, "Thank you, Aki," before she cleared her throat and repeated herself.

He only smiled at her, which warmed her tremendously, then began leading her back towards the congestion. She tugged on his hand. "Um, are you sure you're okay? We don't need to be super close."

"We've got to experience the show to the max," he said once she

was standing beside him. “We can try and get as close as we can, but still a comfortable distance in case we need to run.”

Minako laughed at him as he resumed his role of guiding her towards Sumida Park. Hundreds and hundreds of people were there. Children, high-school teenagers, adults, everyone had come out. Truth be told, the crowds made Minako slightly worried, too. She took comfort knowing that Akihiko was next to her, like he always had been, like he always would be.

Almost an hour later, after being situated on a small bench (Akihiko had found an empty one and she considered that pure luck), she heard the announcements to start the beginning of the show. He draped both arms around her as she leaned back into him and rested her hands over his. She couldn’t see his face without turning, but she didn’t have to. Her memories of the last festival they went to played in her mind like she was looking at him right now.

Her heart beat like she was a child watching fireworks for the first time. One streaked through the air, then popped loudly and separated into beautiful greens, blues, and oranges. A second, third, and fourth followed before she felt something land on the top of her head.

It happened again, this time attracting the other bystanders.

Behind her, she heard Akihiko grumble. “Damn it.”

It was raining.

Well, she was still happy. It had been a wonderful day. A little bit of rain wouldn’t upset her. Even if it was going to cancel the show.

A little bit of rain turned into a torrential downpour a few minutes later. The crowds of people disappeared faster than she ever thought possible. She laughed as Akihiko cursed a few more times for *knowing* it was likely to rain and forgetting to bring an umbrella. He apologized, but instead of dragging him into a congested building or train station, she kept him from getting too far once everyone had rushed out of the weather.

His first remark was to chide her. “You’re going to get sick if we stay out in the rain, Minako.”

To annoy him, she spun around with her arms out like she was a thirsty plant soaking up the offering of water. “You’ll nurse me back to health, right?”

There was an unknown look on his face that she couldn’t quite place. It didn’t help that she was distracted. He was soaked, his hair matted down from the rain, water streams running down his face, and his dark red shirt (unfortunately for her it wasn’t white) clung to him like a second skin. So naturally, when he stepped up to her, grabbed her by the waist, and *kissed* her, she almost collapsed onto the ground.

By the time she registered that Akihiko had one: been kissing her in public and two: made the first move, he had pulled away. His hold on her was strong enough to keep her upright since she was pretty sure her knees gave out at one point.

He dropped his head onto hers, but he refused to look into her eyes. “Sorry.”

Her response was to throw her arms around his neck and laugh softly. “Then I want you to kiss me again. So I’m ready this time.”

And he did just that.

Chapter 58

Chapter 58

Ren was always told he was a “smooth” and “charismatic” guy. He had a gift for talking to people; friends, family, strangers, about anything and everything.

He didn’t want to tell people that he was just lonely and anyone who spoke to him, he had a weak attachment to. He knew so much because every time he was not speaking to people, which was more often than not, he had his nose in a book, or was reading something on his phone. He enjoyed learning at school, at home, with Sojiro at Leblanc. It wasn’t so much a superpower as much as it was his brain being able to store a variety of knowledge and then use it when he needed to.

But one thing he never had practice for had been an unofficial *date* with a girl who may or may not have liked him just as much.

Ren followed behind Ryuji and Yusuke at Aoyama-Ichome Station easily enough. Ann had told him earlier that her and Makoto would meet them at Asakusa Station once they were ready to head out. Ren wanted to take Makoto from school, but he thought better of it. He didn’t want the others to think he was playing favorites. Ann said she could manage the boys by herself at the festival rather than in public on the trains, so he decided it was best to follow her advice.

He was never one to get nervous around people, but he suddenly found himself clenching his hands inside his pockets once he caught sight of Ann and Makoto coming towards them. Ann was quick to pounce on Ryuji for something he had said. Yusuke was too drawn into the scene to really notice anything else. And Ren was far too nervous to step over to Makoto and ask if she wanted to head out before the bloodbath.

He was thankful that Ann was more interested in the festival than arguing with Ryuji, so she was the one to lead the group out of the station. Ren had a hard time trying to walk while thinking of

something to say to Makoto, who had chosen to walk next to him. (Had she done that on purpose, or was she walking beside him to avoid Ann and Ryuji?)

“I hope it doesn’t rain,” was the only thing he could say once they were all outside. The humidity was powerful, an imaginary weight on his chest that he didn’t need. He took a few deep breaths, hoping that would help, then noticed Ann looking at him from the corner of his eyes.

“And off we go!” She hooked her arm around Ryuji’s, who vehemently tried to tell her to let him go, but she pushed him along regardless. Ren worried Yusuke was going to follow behind him and Makoto if they went their separate ways, but the taller boy seemed more interested in the stalls serving food more than anything else.

Again, he was torn between grabbing Makoto’s hand and whisking her off to explore on their own, but he didn’t. He was nervous, one, and two, he didn’t want anyone to think less of him for leaving the group. Ann was the only one (other than Makoto) that knew he had asked her to go with him. What if Ryuji asked where he had disappeared to when he challenged Ren to a game? Or if he needed to spot Yusuke some yen because the boy was *starving?*

He compromised. He turned to Makoto, who stared ahead at Ann walking down the street with Ryuji, and held out his hand. “So. What do you want to do first?”

It was the first time Makoto actually met his eyes since before school had let out. He cherished her five second blush before she looked away. “I-I…I don’t know.”

Having known Makoto for several months now, Ren knew it was likely that he was going to have to be the decision maker for the night. Not that he minded, but he had never been to a festival this large before. Granted neither had she, apparently, but it made him more anxious.

But, he was the leader. He always had a clear head. He always made hard choices when he needed to make them quickly. “Well, let’s just walk around for a bit then. Is that okay?”

She chose to nod instead of giving him a verbal response, but at least she reached out and placed her hand in his. Thinking about it was making him warm inside, even though it was a hot, sticky day and he was already plenty warm. He smiled at her and tugged on her hand to get her moving. He was pretty sure his warmth spread out over his face when the crowds of people made Makoto step into him and he took a chance to move his arm around her back to walk with more ease.

However, as the night continued on, things became more complicated. He asked her if she wanted to try some of the weird or normal food stalls, to which she always shook her head. He asked her if she wanted to play one of the games with him, to which, again, she only shook her head. As the sun began to fall behind the horizon, he noticed her growing more impatient, more nervous, more…afraid?

Ren took the stupid little toy he had won as a prize from his game and held it up to her face. “Are you okay?”

The eye contact didn’t last long. “I-I’m okay.”

That was when he noticed how tight her hands were curled up by her sides. A knife cut through his heart and he finally realized the cause of her anxiety. “Do you want me to take you home?”

Makoto looked up at him and must have caught the unintentional sadness in his tone. “I’m sorry…”

He let the silence linger for a few minutes, waiting for her to elaborate, but when she chose not to, he exhaled deeply. “I never meant to make this uncomfortable for you. I just…thought we could have fun together.”

The toy in his hand fell to his side with his arm, but it was nice to have something to hold on to. He just wished it could have been her hand…Makoto appeared to be debating about what to say to him, but once her breath left her lungs and her shoulders dropped, he understood what she had been trying to say.

She didn’t want to be there with him. She just couldn’t tell someone

no .

“Let’s meet back up with everyone else,” he said, just so he could say something. “I think the fireworks are going to start soon.”

Makoto flinched when he reached out to offer his hand, so he let it fall back to his side. She was the first to head down the street, and he was grateful for it. He didn’t want her to see how *miserable* and *hurt* he was because his day went to *shit* . A first time festival in Tokyo with a girl he had been crushing on for weeks was going to go into a section of memories about his probation he wished he could erase.

Ren had a hell of time following after Makoto and an even harder time avoiding Ann’s gaze when they all met back up. It likely didn’t take much for Ann to understand from his body language alone how well his evening had gone.

So while they pushed through people to find a small opening to stand and wait for the fireworks, Ren began to think. Maybe Makoto didn’t like big crowds of people, or festivals in general. Maybe she still felt somewhat out of place in their group of friends and was uncomfortable. Maybe she had the same thoughts he did and didn’t want the others to misinterpret their actions as favoritism. Maybe whatever was happening that she didn’t want to talk about in her personal life was becoming much too great for her to handle.

But it always brought up the same question. Why didn’t she *tell* him? Which led him back to his first thought.

She doesn’t like me .

“Dude, I am so ready for this!”

Ryuji was thankfully rowdy and energetic standing next to him and he couldn’t help but smile at his friend. Ren was pretty excited too, but it was hard to be as excited beside Ryuji when he could have been standing beside Makoto after a fun-filled night of smiles and laughter.

Yusuke, who stood on his other side, held up his fingers in his

trademark frame. “I am also eager to see the pastel colors dance along their midnight blue canvas.”

Ren would never understand Yusuke.

Even Ann was glancing up at the sky with bright and eager eyes and an excited smile.

Makoto looked just as terrified as she had been when he walked her back to meet with the group.

He decided to enjoy *one* aspect of his day and turned his head back towards the first firework that exploded in the sky.

He felt a drop on his head, but thought little of it, watching in awed silence as an array of fireworks brightened up the darkness above them.

Until he felt it again.

Because why not just ruin this day all together…

They all waited out the rain inside a convenience store where the humidity and the cluster of people only made Ren want to crawl behind the counter and hide. He was hurt. He was upset. He was a little angry. But more than that, he *understood.* He didn’t want to believe that he wasn’t a great friend, a nice guy, or anything but a *criminal* , but that was all he was ever going to be to Makoto. It wasn’t any easier to tell himself that he needed to *move on* , hoping that he was just getting into his mind too much, but he was tired of trying to get through to her.

Even as they all stood inside and groaned about the weather, the humidity, the *people* , Makoto could still hold a conversation with Ann. So what was it about *him* , other than his status, or his desire to *help* her, that she didn’t like?

He feared he would never even know.

Morgana’s movement inside his bag jerked him back to attention. “I’m *dying* in here!”

Ren took advantage of the opportunity that was presented to him. “I’m going to head home. Morgana needs some air.” His friends looked over at him with mild surprise, including Makoto, but he only hiked his bag higher over his shoulder. “I’ll see you guys later.”

Just before he had to push past where Ann and Makoto were standing, Ryuji’s arm wrapped around his shoulders. “Dude, it’s still raining outside!”

Ren tried to step out of his hold, but his friend’s grip was strong. “It’s fine,” he said, trying and failing a second time to free himself. “The station isn’t that far from here.”

Ryuji let him go and he was able to make it as far as right outside the automatic doors before Ann came up behind him. “C’mon, Ren. You can’t just *leave.* ”

“I don’t want to stay.” He refused to look back at her. “This entire night has been a disaster. Staying would only make it worse.”

Ann said nothing else to him as he walked towards the station. He used his button-up shirt as a rain shield, but of course the rain had to be as brutal and unforgiving as the day had been. Thankfully, he was able to stick close enough to the buildings that he was wet, but not soaked, when he reached the inside of the station.

Morgana shifted in his bag and managed to free his head, but oddly enough, the cat remained quiet. While Ren was desperate to get all of his emotions off of his chest, he knew better than to voice them aloud in public to Morgana. Morgana’s presence helped in a small way to calm him down. His phone also served as a wonderful distraction. He flipped through the news headlines, zeroed in on the ones about the Phantom Thieves, and listened to the conversations around him.

Many of them were speaking of the Phantom Thieves as well.

A few others were grumbling about the rain canceling the fireworks.

Someone was calling him by name, which was weird because who in the crowd of people on the platform would know him personally?

“Ren?”

He thought he was going crazy for half a minute, but then the voice got louder until it became a physical force on his arm. The tugging of his shirt sleeve is what made him lower his phone and turn his attention to the person trying to reach him.

The phone slipped from his hand and hit the ground with a *thud* . Ren shook off his surprise and bent over to pick up his phone. He realized that he had not seen a ghost, or an illusion, or had been out of his mind when Makoto was still standing next to him when he straightened his back.

“I didn’t mean to frighten you.”

Ren didn’t know what to do. She appeared to be alone, her hair stuck to her face and small streams of water fell from her hair. He found her extremely cute, but then remembered that he was hurting and he forced himself to look away from her.

“Did you need something?”

But he couldn’t tell her off without feeling worse than he already was. He grabbed the strap over his shoulder just to *do* something. His other hand tightened around his phone. He waited in the sticky and stiff silence for her to say something back to him. He refused to look at her and his eyes glanced down to the feet of the commuters in front of him. He began to count seconds in his head until the train would arrive, *anything* to keep him composed next to her.

“I-I…” Her failed attempt to speak made his heart pound painfully in his ribcage. From the side of his vision, he saw her wipe her hands over the front of her yukata and she lowered her head with a frown. “I’m sorry.”

Ren ignored the tension building in his shoulders. “You could have told me you didn’t want to go with me. I didn’t want you to be so miserable.”

His tone cut his own heart, but Makoto appeared to take just as much damage. Her hands balled into fists by her thighs and she

squeezed her eyes shut as if she was in pain. “I-I’m sorry…”

“What are you sorry for?” He moved his feet so he could fully face her. She didn’t lift her head. She didn’t move. She didn’t speak for the longest few minutes and the air around them became far too thick and he felt himself struggle to breathe.

Ren opted not to say anything to her and turned his attention back to waiting for the train. He focused on his phone again, but his mind wandered and the words on the screen blurred together. Where the hell was the train?

“I’m sorry I ruined your day because I didn’t want to be there.” Ren turned his head slightly, stung by Makoto’s words, but hoping that she would say something more to his liking. To his surprise, her eyes met his and she didn’t look away, even if he knew she wanted to. “I…I’ve been to the festival before, back when I was a child.”

One of her arms crossed over her body and held onto her other arm. He suddenly wanted her to hold onto him. “But…” she started, breaking eye contact and her voice became a whisper. “The fireworks…they, um, they scared me.” Her hand tightened around her arm. “I didn’t want to go and freak you out and have you think I was weird or annoying and I kept thinking about it and then I realized what I was doing but I couldn’t tell you I’m sorry.”

Her words started out slow and quiet and then quickly turned into a mad rush in one, long breath. It was cute, especially since she had a light dusting of pink on her face before she looked away from him. However, his heart still hurt. She could have told him she didn’t want to go, or told him that she was worried, and he could have comforted her and not let it ruin their (and *his)* night.

“Why didn’t you tell me the truth when I asked you?” Makoto took a step back, not at all expecting his reaction, and it only made him more frustrated. “Look, I get that we don’t know each other all that well, but tonight could have been a lot of fun for me. I’ve never been to something like this, and I wanted to share that moment with someone I thought would have had fun, too. So if you really didn’t want to go, you should have told me.”

He felt sick to his stomach, but after another quiet apology from Makoto, he ended the conversation there. Makoto clearly got the message and turned and walked farther down the platform so they didn't have to be on the same car. Every nerve in his brain was telling him to go after her, but his feet were too heavy to move. His heart was too heavy to feel.

Morgana did his best from inside the confines of his bag to console him, but this time, it did nothing to help. He had to wait for three trains to fill up before he could find the courage to get smashed into a car. The rain was unrelenting once he returned back to Yongen-Jaya, but he had lost his ability to care earlier on that night.

Sojiro was surprisingly still inside the store when Ren stepped inside, a small puddle of water forming on the flooring by his feet. There were no customers inside the café, but Sojiro greeted him just like he would someone he wasn't too happy to see.

"The hell is wrong with you? It's that time of year, kid." The older man was kind enough at least to offer him a towel. "Bring your umbrella every day if you don't want to get soaked."

Ren didn't ask Sojiro what to bring to help him talk to a girl who was becoming a brick wall.

It wasn't any easier trying to avoid Makoto the next few days at school. Ryuji was hounding him about Mementos and a new target they had yet to discover. Ann kept hounding him about what the hell had happened at the festival. Yusuke was a breath of fresh air when he spent a few hours people watching with the artist at Shibuya Station.

"I'm afraid I'm in a bit of a slump," Yusuke had told him, to which Ren could only scan over the people as they walked by, unable to voice his own thought.

So am I.

He got that rude awakening that night once he made sure Yusuke had enough money to get home after he had been fed. Ren took a seat behind the coffee siphon in Leblanc and used his arms as a

pillow to rest his chin on.

“Will you teach me how to do this one day?”

From the opposite side of the bar, Sojiro scoffed at him. “Trying to get the ladies to like you, eh?”

How the hell did Sojiro translate his desire to learn how to make coffee into getting a girl? “Um, no. I just really like what you make and I would like to learn.”

Sojiro’s hand waved in the air. “Probably ain’t getting a girl anyway with that record of yours.”

Thanks.

“And now, we interrupt this program for breaking news.”

Ren turned his head to watch the television, annoyed that it was likely another segment of Akechi spewing his typical judgments about the Phantom Thieves. But then a green backdrop came across the screen, the name *@MEDJED* showing up in darker colors.

“To the Phantom Thieves causing an uproar in Japan: Do not speak of your false justice. We do not need the spread of such falsehood. We are the true executors of justice. However, we are magnanimous. We will give you an opportunity to repent your ways. If you agree to a change of heart, we will accept you as our own. If you reject our offer, the hammer of justice will find you. We are Medjed. We are unseen. We will eliminate evil.”

A small grin worked over his face.

It sounded like the Phantom Thieves were getting a new job.

Chapter 59

Chapter 59

Two things sat on her bed in front of her: her phone with two thoughtfully crafted messages for two separate people, and a sheet of notebook paper with two words out of many circled in dark, black ink.

Makoto stared at them both for minutes, if not hours, unable to do anything with either. She felt proud of herself for having the courage to type (but not send) a message to Ren, telling him that she was sorry for the fireworks festival, but deleted the sentence about possibly wanting to make it up to him and if he would want to perhaps study again at the café with her.

Her second message had been just as hard, if not harder, to formulate. It brought her back to the damning evidence that she was losing sleep over and ultimately, shutting down over. She was pushing everyone away again; her new friends, her parents, people who were starting to notice and grow annoyed with her for clamming up.

Sis has a palace…

She hadn't spoken to Ren since she walked away from him at the station after the festival, except via a group text after Medjed had made their appearance. Earlier that morning at school, they all decided (again over group messages) that they needed to meet, so they agreed to head to Leblanc the next day to discuss their plan of attack. Ren also told them that he had been contacted by someone codenamed *Alibaba* and the conversation was easier to talk about in person. The only reason they were postponing their meeting until the next day had been because Makoto told them all she had plans and couldn't go.

She lied, kind of.

Makoto *had* to get to the bottom of the issue with her sister and she

had to do it *now* . So far, Sae had avoided any and all contact with her family, but Makoto was unsure how long that was going to last. Whether or not she wanted to admit it, Sae was very much like their dad, always true to her word and going extra lengths if needed. If she wanted her information on the Phantom Thieves and Kaneshiro from Makoto or their father, she would get it.

But Makoto was scared to investigate alone. Which is why she had made her second message to Mitsuru. She had asked Makoto at one point to show her the Metaverse so she could gain a better understanding of what was happening, and she now had her chance to see it.

She only wished it had been under better circumstances.

However, neither message to Mitsuru nor Ren had been sent, and she knew it was to that point in her mental debate that if she didn't send them *now* , she wouldn't. If anything, she wanted to send the one to Mitsuru, then maybe once they had a feel for Sae's palace, she could feel more (or less) comfortable around Ren. Assuming, of course, he even wanted to be her friend anymore.

"Makoto!"

She jumped in her seat, waited a minute or two for her heart to settle, then slowly climbed off the bed. The moment she opened her door, hints of her mother's cooking filled the air and she was suddenly struck by how *hungry* she was. Thanks to her jumbled nerves and her horrible half-lie to her friends, she hadn't eaten much of a lunch.

The second she walked into the kitchen to stand behind her seat at the table, she met the hardening glare of her father's eyes. Just as quickly as the hunger came, it faded away entirely.

"Um," she started oh so proudly. "I, uh…I already have dinner plans."

She turned and ran back into her room, letting her *full* lie hang in the air for her parents to do whatever they wanted with. Makoto grabbed her phone, folded up her notes on Sae's keywords to enter her

palace, and tried as hard as she could to be as small and quiet and unnoticed as she made her way to the front door.

“Got yourself a second date, I see.”

Her mom gave her a beautiful smile, her eyes glistening with happiness. Behind her, her dad did much the opposite. It didn’t take long for Makoto to break eye contact with him and grab her bag by the door. “We’re just friends.”

It was hard to keep up the charade when her mother was overjoyed by the thought of her being with someone she would never have a chance with. “That’s oftentimes how it starts out.”

The longer she remained in the house under the angry stare of her dad, the more heart she was going to lose. She ignored her mom, slipped on her shoes, and rushed out the door as fast as she could. Once she was out of the building, she took a deep breath, letting the fresh air calm her erratic heartbeat. She did so a few more times, but once she was calm enough to take a step forward, the reality of what she had done hit her like a train.

Not only had she lied to Ren about her parents, she lied to her friends, then turned around and lied to her *parents* . But she kept marching towards the station, trying to tell herself that this was an emergency and something needed to be done or the ones she loved were going to suffer the most.

She wasn’t stupid like last time and wasn’t going to charge into a mafia’s establishment to *talk* things over. She knew what she was doing. To an extent. Tonight would be more of a “curiosity” phase. She didn’t know enough about the Metaverse to be waltzing into her sister’s palace alone and expect to come out with a victory. Sae was a force of her own in the real world, let alone a cognitive version where *she* had the power.

Makoto would have felt better taking a peek inside if she had sent that message to Mitsuru, but it was too late for that now. She boarded a train bound towards Kasumigaseki, her shoulders shaking, unable to sit still on the train as her fingers clawed at her palms. There was one disapproved stare from an older gentleman,

so she clamped her hands together tightly and focused on counting her breaths.

Just when she managed to stop the shaking, she arrived at her destination. Walking allowed her to wear off some of her nervous anxiety while her mind kicked into overdrive.

Where was she going to enter the Metaverse at?

Would Sae show up and try to stop her before she went in?

Would a shadow version of Sae know she was there and try to kill her?

What would she think of Sae once she saw her palace? What was her palace like?

Would she find other versions of her family, too?

Would she run into the guy with the black mask?

“Niijima-san?”

Being in the unstable mindset she had been in, she was proud of herself for containing the scream that got caught in the back of her throat. She sure as hell hadn’t expected to run into Akechi this late in the day outside of the courthouse.

“Oh. H-Hello, Akechi-kun.”

Makoto knew very little about Akechi, besides the fact he bested her in every mock exam in the past. At one point, Akechi stood up for her dad before he had been transferred to Shibuya a while back. He worked with the police, so the fact he knew her dad hadn’t been surprising, but she would have thought Akechi would have been home by now and not roaming around the district…

“Coming to visit your sister?”

His words caught her off balance. How well did Akechi know Sae? Did they work together often? If that was true, did that mean Sae was going to send Akechi to follow her around to find the evidence

she needed to turn on her?

She forced herself to stand up straight and not appear weak in front of her academic rival. “I just wanted to have a word with her.”

One of his gloved hands held his chin as he contemplated her words. “Odd. She left the office a few hours ago to speak to someone. I wasn’t aware you *didn’t* know she wasn’t going to be around.”

There was an accusation on his tongue. She immediately regretted coming out at all. “I…I see.” What was she supposed to say now? Could she walk away without him following her and asking her more unnerving questions? Why couldn’t she flip the tables on him and ask him what *he* was doing near the courthouse?

“Am I making you uncomfortable?”

As much as she tried not to, her eyes lowered to the ground and her hands locked behind her back. Her weight shifted from one side of her body to the next, hoping that it would help her *think* of something to say to him. Akechi took a few steps closer to her until he stopped right in her line of sight. She didn’t realize he was reaching out for her until she felt his hands land on her shoulders.

He smiled at her, but her stomach began to turn at the gesture. “Do you really think I’m a scary guy?”

“Well…no…” She was pretty sure Akechi was harmless. She knew if he wasn’t, she could take him out easily enough. But she had heard her friends talk about him in a light that made her not want to trust him. She really needed to get away from him.

Akechi was at least kind enough to give her some space. “I’m sure with the recent shout out from Medjed, everyone in Tokyo is a little on edge to see what the Phantom Thieves are going to do.”

She knew immediately he was fishing for information. Even during her small run-in with him at the mock exams, he had asked for her thoughts (as minimal as they were) about the Phantom Thieves, since he had made his opinions well known on television right before

she found out about Kaneshiro.

Did Akechi think she was one of them? Worse yet, did he know about the change in Sae and was waiting for the Phantom Thieves to call her out as a target?

Knowing what his intentions were for speaking to her, it was a little easier to try and push him away. “I’m sure that the nation has excellent technological experts and they can investigate this Medjed on their own.”

She was proud again when Akechi faltered. “Well, I guess this is one way to look at it.”

It fueled her momentum. “For someone who claims to be at odds against the Phantom Thieves, you are very curious about them.”

Perhaps she could gain his side of the story without dropping any unnecessary hints. Akechi, however, smiled widely and waved his hand in front of his face. “I am curious about them. If I knew who they were, I could ask about their motives and better understand the way they think. Their powers are fascinating, don’t you think?”

Makoto opened her mouth to reply when something heavy landed in her stomach as she watched Akechi’s smile disappear.

“Shouldn’t you both be at home?”

Dad .

Akechi resumed his politeness, bowed to her, then offered a pleasant good night. Makoto could *feel* her dad’s disapproval once Akechi had turned and walked off, but his sudden presence threw her off. Plus, she knew he was furious, didn’t trust her, and now probably thought that she was out to dinner with *Akechi.*

“How was dinner?”

The tone in his voice made the humid, summer air turn ice cold against her skin. “Um…”

“Let’s go.”

Makoto knew better than to disobey, given the tone in his voice, so she simply followed a few steps behind him back to the station. She was running through scenarios in her head, trying to best prepare for whatever questions he was going to bombard her with once they stepped inside the apartment. She couldn't come out and tell him the truth. Not only would he think she was lying, again, but the second she mentioned her sister, he would become difficult to talk to.

However, Mitsuru did tell her that he had a persona, at one point in time, so maybe he would be more understanding. But if she did come out and tell him about the Metaverse, her persona, Sae's palace, he would likely put it all together and realize *she* was a Phantom Thief. And he was a cop, so he might take her information to Sae and then her sister would throw her in a dark cell and she would have no choice but to spill the beans on the other members.

They were back inside the apartment much too quickly. She wasn't ready. She was scared. She had to do something, even though all she could do at the moment was stare at the ground in shame and frustration.

Her mother at least came to her defense. "Aki, you can't just force Makoto home because you don't want her to be out with a guy." It made her heart hurt.

"I'm sure Akechi would have treated her to nothing special." She knew her dad's glare was strengthening. "What were you doing out in Kasumigaseki, Makoto?"

She couldn't tell them. She would get arrested, and then her *friends* would get arrested. All while Sae slipped further and further into her madness. What else would be out there that she could try and lie about? Cafes? Bookstores? Collectable shops? How long had she been silent?

Her dad took a step forward and she was half-tempted to run and hide in her room. "What were you doing, Makoto?"

"Stop it, Aki," her mother interjected as she placed a hand on Makoto's shoulder. "You need to *trust* her. Storming off after her isn't

a great way for her to think you want her to grow up."

"How did you find out about Kaneshiro?"

If she held her hands in front of her, he would know she was nervous and trying to find a way to avoid talking to him. The fact that she had yet to *look* at him was probably all the evidence he really needed, but he could be very scary sometimes.

"Makoto."

"Stop it."

But the last thing she wanted was for her parents to start fighting over her *lies* . "I…I heard about him from…students at school." She hadn't, at least, hadn't learned his name. She only knew *what* Kaneshiro was doing, not *who* he was.

Her half-truth didn't faze her father. "Is that so?"

It was times like these that made her wish she was a stronger person. "I…"

"Or did you go snooping around in places you shouldn't have been?"

The anger was gone from his tone, but Makoto didn't know if the disappointment had been any better. Especially since he *knew* and she couldn't keep lying. "Oh…um…y-yes…I found his name from y-your desk."

As hard as it was to admit, her mom's reaction cut her deeply. "What?"

And the anger flared back to life in her dad's voice. "Good. So you admit you've been *lying.* And what are you trying to get into now? Kaneshiro wasn't enough for you? Are you hoping to throw yourself into more danger?"

It was becoming harder to breathe. Her eyes stung. Her nails were cutting into her palms. "Stop that, Aki."

"This is why I can't trust you, Makoto! You're *lying* to us about

everything!”

Three.

“How is she supposed to talk to you when you keep *yelling* at her all the time?”

Two.

“Oh, I’m sorry that I don’t want my daughter getting wrapped up in blackmail from a criminal who wanted me *dead!* ”

One.

“You can’t keep thinking that’s all she wants to do!”

“That *is* all she wants to do!”

“Mitsuru told me you had a persona.”

The argument between her parents came to an abrupt stop. She thought she heard both of them gasp in surprise as well. The silence became too much for her, so she forced herself to look up and take in both of their expressions.

They were both the same: wide eyes, parted lips, still in their body movements. Her mother, however, was the first to overcome her shock. “Mitsuru told you this?”

Makoto nodded her head. “I spoke to her the day she took me out at night, and then she told me Dad had one,” she said as she met his eyes. “A-And I have one, too.”

It was terrifying in its own way watching her dad go from furious, surprised, to horrified. He ran one of his hands through his hair before he fell back against the table. “W-What…? How…?”

She didn’t know if he was talking to her or just talking out loud. But she also knew that now that it was out in the open, it was time to accept it and try to keep her friends from getting into trouble. “I can’t really explain it. But I was angry. I was useless. I was tired of you, and mom, and Sis, and other people always having to help me.

Once I realized that I wanted to be stronger, it just…happened…”

Several minutes passed in silence. Makoto was willing to let her parents digest the information, but she was drowning. Were they going to judge her? Would they freak out and become more overprotective now that they knew? Mitsuru didn’t seem to think her abilities were a *bad* thing, but Mitsuru wasn’t her mom or her dad.

Why did she have to say such stupid things without thinking them through every time she had her back against a wall?

Her dad eventually sat down, but his expression remained unchanged. It broke Makoto’s heart, worried that her relationship with him would never be the same again. Her mom, however, ushered her to sit down beside her on the couch.

“This is the change we both noticed in you,” she said quietly. “Why didn’t you say anything to us back then?”

Makoto sank into the cushions of the couch. “I was scared you wouldn’t believe me.”

“How did you get one?” Her mom’s eyes narrowed in confusion. “Is the Dark Hour a thing now?”

Her *mother* knew about it, too? “Um…no.” Now her head was spinning again. “It’s called the Metaverse.”

“Does Mitsuru know all of this?” came her father’s voice from behind her. He sounded so tired.

“Y-Yes.” Her hands twisted together on her lap. “I don’t know much about it. Mitsuru didn’t seem to know much, either.”

Then her dad asked the question she was dreading. “Are you one of those Phantom Thieves?”

The silence was *overwhelming* . Makoto squeezed her hands so tightly together that she was sure she heard her fingers crack. She tasted blood on the bottom of her lip from where she was biting down too hard. Her vision became blurry again. Her lungs were burning from her inability to breathe properly.

Until she felt a hand on her shoulder and the world came back into focus. “Makoto, I know you’re worried your dad is going to turn you in, or your friends, but we want to help you.” The smile her mother gave her made her throat burn and her eyes sting for a different reason. “You’re our daughter. We will do everything we can to help you.”

She felt a few tears stream down her face, but she was quick to wipe them away with the back of her hand. “You don’t hate me?”

Her mother laughed and wrapped her in a hug. “I would rather you tell us these things than hide from us.” Makoto pulled back in her arms, but the smile was still shining on her mom’s face. “You must have gotten your strength from your father.”

It was hard, but Makoto managed to peek over the edge of the couch to where her dad was sitting in the kitchen. Both of his hands were supporting his head and his fingers dug into his hair. She hoped he was only worried rather than angry, but it was hard to tell without him speaking.

“He’s not mad, Makoto,” her mom said with a loud enough voice that her dad could hear her. “This is a lot for us to have to take in, so give it some time.”

“I-Is me having a persona…bad?”

Her mom shook her head lightly. “From what I understand, a persona shows the strength of your heart. There might be those who use the power for evil, but I know you aren’t one of them.”

She opened her mouth to ask a question, but her dad’s voice filled the room first. “So why were you out in Kasumigaseki then? With Akechi, of all people?”

The air became cold again, but her mother noticed her stiffening shoulders and took both her hands in hers. “It’s okay, Makoto.”

Makoto took a deep breath, then decided to keep her truth streak going. “I want to help Sis.”

Her mom reeled back slightly, and she could only imagine how her

father had taken her words. “Is she in trouble?”

She saw her dad come around the corner of the couch, waiting for her to address them again. She couldn’t find the strength to keep her head up and she was thankful that her mother was still holding on to her hands. “She…she has a palace.”

“W-What does that even mean?”

It was hard to answer her dad’s question. “It’s a Metaverse term to describe someone’s out of control desires.” Her eyes squeezed shut to keep herself from crying. “I was scared that she was going to have us arrested just because she was angry. But she cares about me, too. So I wanted to be the one to try and bring her to her senses.”

Her dad landed on the couch behind her mom. “How would knowing she has a palace bring her to her senses?”

It was a question she truthfully had only experienced first-hand once. She wasn’t an expert. But she also saw the change the Phantom Thieves had brought to those they had targeted. Would Sae suffer the same? Would she get arrested for being too headstrong? Or would she have a smaller, less drastic change since Sae wasn’t a *terrible* human being…yet?

Regardless, her sister needed help. Makoto knew how to help, so she had to see it through. “You have to defeat her in her palace, take the object that brought about her change, then wait for her change to take place.”

Her parents exchanged looks before her dad narrowed his eyes at her. “This is how the Phantom Thieves changed Kaneshiro, and Kamoshida…”

Makoto nodded her head. “Y-Yes.”

There was another moment of silence. Then, “W-What’s going to happen to Sae if successful?”

It had been so long since Makoto had heard any level of fear in her father’s voice. But she also knew that both her parents would want

to help anyway they could. And to help, they needed to be informed. “I’m not sure. She’s not a criminal, so I would assume her change wouldn’t be quite the same. But we have to stop her before she drowns in her anger and hurts a lot of people.”

Her dad lowered his face into his hands and her mom turned in her seat and put her hands on his leg. However, her dad shook his head and pushed himself off the couch, startling both Makoto and her mom.

“You’re going to show me what you’re talking about right now.”

Her mom was quick to her feet. “Aki, you don’t even know if you can summon him anymore, and you’re not at full strength yet to make me believe you can fight your way through this without him.”

“She’s my *daughter* , Minako. I have to help her!”

“It’s okay.” Makoto stood as well. “I-I can go with you. I-I want to help her, too. But…I don’t want the others to know. We all agreed to change a heart together, and I’m kind of…betraying them with this.”

“Fine,” her dad said quietly. “But you’re going to take me now.”

Her mom clearly did not approve. “No. I will not have *either* of you going out tonight, tomorrow, or whenever. There is nothing wrong with Sae.” Her voice became much quieter, and it made Makoto feel terrible for telling them the truth. “She’s our *daughter* . She’s not like that. She’s not. She’s not like…like…”

Her dad was the one to catch her before she fell back onto the couch. Makoto could feel the burn starting fresh in the back of her eyes. “Then we will investigate.” Her dad’s eyes met hers. “We will go with Mitsuru. If something is seriously wrong with Sae, she would be the one who could tell at first glance.” Her mom started crying in his arms. “We won’t fight her. Not until we know there’s nothing else we can do.”

Makoto could only nod while her mother’s cries filled the silence.

Chapter 60

Chapter 60

With this chapter, I break the 200K word mark.

And there's at least 100 more chapters to come 😈

It was the worst night of sleep he had in months.

In his nightmare, he saw Sae, his *daughter* , the young infant that made him a *father,* as one of the giant, grotesque shadows that he had destroyed during the Dark Hour. She taunted him, lured him in for an attack, then cried and pleaded with him once his fist connected with her body. He immediately woke up after her shadow laughed at his fear and landed a critical hit, but in the darkness of the night, he waited for her to reappear and finish him off.

So when a hand landed on his arm, his first instinct was to slap it away. "Stop it!"

Akihiko grabbed his head with both hands, trying to steady his breathing and calm the nausea building in his stomach. But the hand persisted, even as he tried to fight it off before it ripped out his heart from his chest.

"Aki, calm down. It's okay."

Was this all a well-devised scheme by Sae's shadow? To make him believe he was safe and okay in bed with Minako, but then Minako would laugh and call him weak and an idiot for *destroying their daughter…*

"Aki, it's okay."

He shook his head, his shoulders, everything he could to defend himself. “Stop it…”

He kept repeating himself until he felt a weight on his thighs, the pressure close enough to his healing injury that it shot a small spike of pain up his leg and into his brain. Thanks to that, he was able to snap out of his haze and look into Minako’s eyes.

Both of her hands cradled his face, but Akihiko felt his heart snap in half when he realized she had tears on her cheeks. “It’s okay. You’re okay. Nothing is going to hurt you.”

She rested her forehead against his while his arms reached around her and held her as tightly as he could. “I’m so sorry, Minako.” He felt one of her hands move to the back of his neck, her grip tight on him as well. “I’ve destroyed my daughter’s life. What kind of father am-,”

“Stop it.” His voice had been weak, but hers hadn’t been any stronger. “You were a wonderful father to her. You still are. And we don’t even know what any of this means right now.”

“What if I have to fight her?” His fingers curled around the back of her shirt. “I can’t do it. I *won’t* do it. I…I…”

Minako pulled away from him enough to get him to look back up at her. His vision was blurry. Was he crying? “I don’t understand what Makoto was talking about, but if it’s anything like what we’ve had to deal with in the past, you *will* fight. Because she *is* your daughter and if that’s the only way to save her, you will do it.”

His head dropped to her chest, unable to look at her any longer. “I would let her kill me before I fought against her.”

Her hands dug into his shoulders and she pushed him back against the wall. “Don’t you *ever* say that.” Her eyes narrowed through her tears and he didn’t know which expression hurt him the most. “You’ve fought your entire life for the ones you loved. If you give up now, everything would have been for *nothing* . Your daughters *love* you. They would be devastated if anything happened to you!”

“But-,”

Instead of a slap to the face, Minako pulled at the back of his hair. The action was sharp enough to cut him off and focus his attention on her, but not painful enough to really hurt. “Sae is our daughter, Aki. She was brought up with as much love as Makoto was. She knows right from wrong. She would never do anything to purposely hurt anyone. She’s likely just stressed about her job and with a little bit of help, she can get back on the right track again.” She released her grip on his hair, then leaned into him and placed her lips against his temple. “And a good parent will do everything they can, even if it’s not easy, to help.”

He buried his face into her shoulder and held onto her like she was the one thing keeping him sane. Hell, she really was. “This is all because of me…”

To his surprise, Minako didn’t say anything else to him and chose to work on getting him to sleep again. As he focused on the motions of her fingers through his hair, the tension in his muscles slowly began to fade away and he practically collapsed against her. She gave off a quiet laugh, then rotated herself to sit next to him on their bed.

“Aki, I know you’ve been upset for years about Sae, but you also need to realize that you’ve done all you can.” One of her hands reached out for his. “Whatever Makoto had been talking about may not even be as bad as you think it is. So please,” she whispered as she squeezed his hand. “Please have faith in her.”

No matter how easily Minako managed to put him to sleep, the nightmares still plagued his mind.

The only positive aspect about the rest of the night was that he didn’t wake her again.

When it was a respectable time in the morning, Akihiko called it quits and figured he needed to speak to the rest of his team. Mitsuru told him she could meet him that evening, usual place, and she could bring Fuuka along as well. Ken didn’t respond to him nearly as quickly as Mitsuru had, but once he did, an *hour* later, it was a simple apology over a text.

Sorry. Need caffeine. Help!

After a five minute conversation with Ken, Akihiko was able to tell him where to meet him for a nice and powerful cup of coffee. What he *didn't* tell Ken was that he had an ulterior motive for going, even if he told himself that Sakura-san's coffee was *that* good and he hadn't had it in a few weeks.

Ken wasn't the happiest morning person he had ever dealt with, but a promise to cover the necessary amount of coffee to wake him up brightened Ken up slightly.

"If you're gonna fish for details about Amamiya and his curiosity for you, I don't have anything."

Akihiko shook his head and led Ken down the narrow alley towards Leblanc. "I actually have something very different to talk about."

Ken held up a hand to stop him. "I need coffee first or I'm not going to make it."

Ken practically stumbled into the café, but the sight of a mobile Akihiko seemed to bring out a warmth from the barista. "Ah, looks like you're bringing in more customers."

They both exchanged a small smile, then Ken plopped himself down on a nearby barstool. "I hear you have good coffee."

Akihiko took the seat next to him. "He likes to party late sometimes."

"Well then," Sakura added with a light chuckle. "You've come to the right place."

Ken's head fell to the counter, his arms serving as a cushion of sorts. However, Akihiko knew he didn't have long before Sakura returned with their drinks. "This might sound really strange, but…" He tightened his hands and threw them on his lap rather than on the counter. "I think something is wrong with my daughter."

Hearing that at least grabbed Ken's attention. He sat up slowly and turned his head. "Makoto? Or Sae?"

The air, although cooled by the air conditioner, became far too heavy for him. “S…Sae.”

Ken’s eyes narrowed in confusion. “How so?”

One of his elbows propped up the side of his head as he leaned down on to it. “Makoto said something about her having a ‘palace’. It’s how these Phantom Thieves bring about peoples’ changes, I guess.”

Ken copied his posture. “Wait…so you think they will target her?”

Honestly, Akihiko had been too emotionally drained to have considered that a possibility. Is that why Makoto finally told him so her friends or her ‘gang’ wouldn’t find out? Would they think less of her if they knew her *sister* was a bad person? But…Sae wasn’t a bad person…right?

“Here you go, gentlemen.”

Two cups of steaming, hot coffee were placed in front of him, something which delighted Ken. Akihiko, however, caught Sakura’s attention before he could walk away. “Um, do you mind if I ask you something?”

The barista leaned back against the wall of coffee beans while reaching into his pocket for his carton of cigarettes. “Depends.”

“That prosecutor…” The minute the words were off of his lips, Sakura frowned deeply. Ken put his cup down on its saucer and looked over at him. However, Akihiko knew he had to keep digging. Sae wasn’t a bad person. She wasn’t. She was only harassing Sakura because *he* wasn’t the best of people…

“What does she want from you?”

Sakura’s body language screamed *back off* , so he did something very unorthodox to hopefully even the playing field. “I ask because… well…” He took a deep breath to steady his nerves. “She’s my daughter.”

He threw his face into his hands and tried to ignore the surprised

stares of the two other men. “It isn’t like her to act this way. I mean no disrespect, but if I knew what she wanted, I could help her. Then she doesn’t have to bother you.”

When he dropped his hands, Sakura’s eyes were narrowed for a few seconds, but then the hand holding his freshly-lit cigarette fell from his lips after a heavy sigh. “And how do I know you’re not working for her?”

He tried his best to flip the tables while he still had the heart. “Do you have children, Sakura-san?”

The man’s eyes went wide and his cigarette almost slipped from his fingers. “Why the hell would you want to know that?”

Akihiko’s shoulders dropped with his sigh. “I was only asking because if you had a child, you would know the kind of sacrifices you would make to help them.”

Ken interrupted with another *clink* of his coffee cup. “Look, I’m seriously lost right now. This coffee is amazing, by the way. But, I will say that whatever you tell us, Sakura-san, it’s for our investigation only.”

Akihiko nodded in agreement. “She’s been furious with me for years, but she shouldn’t be using that as an excuse to bother good citizens.”

Sakura’s features softened to some degree, then his eyes roamed around the small café. Sakura leaned in on his forearm and faced towards the door, keeping an eye out for new, or unwanted customers. “She’s demanding information about someone I knew several years ago.”

Akihiko waited a few minutes as Sakura fought with himself. But before he could ask him who he had been talking about, Sakura spoke back up. “Wakaba Isshiki.”

From the corner of his eye, Akihiko saw Ken give him a questioning stare, as if silently asking him if he knew the woman. The name sounded way too familiar to him. Where had he heard it?

Sakura continued on. “If you want to know anymore, you’ll have to talk to someone else.” Sakura took a puff from his cigarette. “I shouldn’t have told you that much.”

“No. Thank you,” came Akihiko’s reply, his hands reaching out for the first time to hold his coffee cup. “I know it’s not easy trusting a stranger.”

Ken nodded next to him. “Do you know how many people this guy has told about his wife and kids?”

Sakura gave him a look as he kicked at Ken’s chair. “So you *are* married to that woman.”

Ken broke out into a fit of laughter as Akihiko fell back in his chair. “Just like you, there’s a lot I don’t want to say. You’re the only person right now that knows I have a daughter. I would like to hope that it can stay that way.”

“Heh, we’ll see.” The butt of Sakura’s cigarette fell into the ashtray. “I feel like I can trust you, I do. But just like you, I will make whatever sacrifice I need to in order to keep the people I care about safe.”

Akihiko finished off his coffee as Sakura turned his attention to a few new arrivals. Ken followed suit, but when Akihiko reached for his wallet, Ken held up a hand to stop him. “I got this one. A small thanks for showing me this place. I feel pretty good right now!”

Ken’s cheery demeanor did very little to cheer him up. He was still trying to figure out why Sae would want to know about a Wakaba Isshiki, and why that name sounded so familiar. He would have to check his notes when he returned home for the day, depending on how late he was out on his initial investigation into this “Metaverse” and Sae’s “palace”.

He stood along with Ken once he had paid for the coffee, then bowed his head to Sakura. “I appreciate the help, Sakura-san.” Akihiko then fished out a business card from his wallet and handed it to him. “I wouldn’t mention me to her if you want to keep your head, but if she does stop by for another visit, please tell me.”

Sakura nodded his head and placed his card into a pocket behind his apron. “See ya ‘round.”

Once they were both outside in the humid July morning, Ken eyed him with concern. “I’m not trying to be rude here, but what the hell is going on?”

The weight on his shoulders became much harder to carry. “Makoto told me that Sae had a ‘palace’, which I guess she could tell because Makoto has a persona, too.”

That got Ken to stop in his tracks. “Whoa, are you serious?”

“She’s apparently had this conversation with Mitsuru about a ‘Metaverse’, and…I’m worried she’s referring to the Dark Hour.”

Ken’s eyes widened even further. “How? How is that possible?” Ken’s eyes fell to the ground in front of him. “Mitsuru would have said something by now if that was the case…”

“Makoto offered to show us,” he said hesitantly. “I *have* to go tonight. Which is why I wanted to meet with everyone. I don’t know what to expect, but if there’s going to be shadows, I want to be prepared.”

“Can we even summon ours anymore?” Ken asked quietly.

Akihiko held a hand over his heart. “I can feel Caesar stirring inside me. I don’t know what that means, but maybe a new Dark Hour happened and a new wave of people birthed personas.” His fingers curled around his shirt. “I don’t even care if I couldn’t call him, I still need to do this. Sae is my *daughter* .”

Ken seemed to be in agreement, but chose not to verbalize anything as they made their way to the station. Ken was the one to break the silence as they stood on the platform in Shibuya.

“Having a kid of my own, I can understand how you’re feeling.” Ken continued to stare at the ground. “I remember Minako was *furious* with you, and I’ll admit, I didn’t understand your concern back then. Until my son was born.” His brown eyes met with his. “This isn’t your fault, Sanada. I know you’re a great father, and you loved Sae as much as you did then as you do now. So let us help. With or without

our powers, we can find a way."

While it was nice to hear these kinds of words from someone other than Minako, it knocked Akihiko off balance. Literally. The gentleman he smacked into gave him a glare, then returned to his phone like nothing had happened. Ken noticed and chuckled at him before turning to face the oncoming train.

"I know you would do the same had I been in your position. You all would."

It was also hard to imagine that this grown-up man next to him was the same child Akihiko had watched Minako harp on for not eating properly. The picture brought a smile to his face. "Thank you, Ken."

"Maybe buy me a drink sometime, or coffee," Ken added as they boarded the train. "You'll have to invite Minako again." A small smile came to Ken's face. "She was a lot of fun to talk to."

"Yeah, because she was drunk," Akihiko replied, gripping one of the rings above his head as the train pulled forward. Neither one of them spoke (they both knew it was bad etiquette), but Ken at least wished him a good day when they had to go their separate ways.

The work day dragged on, and on, and on. Akihiko had to do his best to ignore the piercing glares from his superiors every hour. Everyone was holding discussions about the newest emergence of Medjed and what the Phantom Thieves would do. He tried to tune them out, not wanting to hear what they could be talking about since his *daughter* was involved, but he couldn't help but be interested at the same time.

"Hey man, the Phantom Thieves are pretty cool. If they wanted the fame, they would have shown their faces by now."

"They're making us cops look like we can't do our damn jobs."

"I don't think Medjed is really any better here."

"If the people support the Phantom Thieves, I'll support them, too!"

A loud *smack* pulled him from his 'gossip' hour. One of his bosses

stood over him, the most sour look he could muster on his face. “Those Phantom bastards are tarnishing our name.”

Akihiko bit back his initial retort, then leaned back in his seat. “It shouldn’t be too hard to do when they did more for that school than we did.”

The man’s glare was truly satisfying. “Rumor has it that *you* are involved.” Both of his hands landed on his desk. “If that’s the case, I can have you arrested.”

“Are you seriously trying to intimidate me right now?” Akihiko also didn’t need more prying eyes and more questions and more doubts and more *negativity* . “You could throw me in prison. Nothing is going to stop.”

“So you admit that you don’t work alone?” Akihiko chose to remain silent and sat up straight to pretend to be interested in something else. His boss didn’t walk away like he had hoped. “I also know you have a weakness.”

Akihiko cracked a smile. “Yeah, everyone knows I’m deathly allergic to sugar.”

But his superior matched his grin with one of his own. “Makoto Niijima.”

Everything went dark for half a second. How he was able to snap back to reality, he didn’t know. But he was caught. That precious second was all his boss needed to understand. So, with the day he was having, the *month* he was having, dealing with *everything* , he pushed himself to his feet.

“What do you want me to say? You want me to confess and tell you everything I know about these Phantom Thieves? Fine. I know *nothing* .” He was pretty sure he heard his knuckles crack as he clenched his hands into fists. “You all turned away from citizens who needed help back when Kamoshida was terrorizing that school. Sakamoto and Makoto both needed help, and where the *fuck* were you? Hiding behind your *goddamn* desk because all you want to do is *piss me off!”*

“Your reaction is strange, given that you have no record of having *children* of your own, supposedly.” Despite the quietness of the room and those around him, Akihiko was deafened by the sound of his own heartbeat in his ears. Did he *know* Makoto was his daughter, or did he *think* he knew and was waiting for some kind of confirmation?

And it would have to happen now, of all times, when he thought that maybe he didn’t need to *hide* . But perhaps this is what Makoto had been talking about months ago. Why did he need to hide the truth if people already assumed she was his daughter, or at least, an equal weakness?

But Akihiko sat back down in his chair and tried to remain calm and distant. Had his boss been asking out of friendly curiosity, maybe he would have told him the truth. “Do you plan on interrogating all the other student council presidents in my district that I’ve spoken to as well? I can provide you a list, if you’d like. Save yourself the trouble.”

Whether or not his sarcasm was enough to change his boss’s mind about Makoto, there was a clear flash of anger over the superior’s face. “I hope you don’t sleep well for several nights. Because that’s when you’ll slip up.” The man grimaced at him and his stomach turned. “I *will* see to it that you never cross paths with me again.”

The second his back was turned and he was a good distance away, Akihiko exhaled all the pent up anger, frustration, and fear from his lungs. A few nearby coworkers were nice enough to ask him if he was okay, nice enough to tell him that *if* something happened to him, the entire force would be in an uproar, and it made him feel so much better. For the time being.

His watch buzzed on his arm and he caught a small message from Mitsuru about their scheduled meeting. The weight that had been temporarily lifted from his shoulders dropped back on him with twice as much force. Not only was Makoto likely going to find herself in some sort of trouble because of him, *Sae* was in trouble *because of him* . But as hard as it was to tell himself that there wasn’t much he could do about Makoto other than warn her and be there for her, there was a chance he could help Sae.

Akihiko met up with Makoto at the train station in Shibuya like he had told her to that morning before she had left for school. The train ride into Shinjuku was done in silence, but he could feel Makoto's apprehension just as thickly as he could the humidity in the air. Once they were off the train and making their way towards the "meeting spot" (Akihiko couldn't believe he was taking Makoto to a *bar)* , he finally reached out and touched her shoulder.

"I know you're worried about your sister." Makoto flinched, but his hand remained on her shoulder. "But I'm going to do everything I can to help her. Even if I'm scared, or worried, or angry at myself. And I'm glad that you're helping as well."

Makoto's lips curled into a small smile as he removed his hand. "I'm glad too, having been able to tell you all of this."

"I wish you weren't so afraid to speak to me or your mother." He stepped closer to her once they turned the corner to head to the bar. "But, I guess a normal parent probably would have lost their mind had you told them you had special powers."

He thought he heard Makoto chuckle. "I…I'm scared for Sis, but I'm kind of excited to see your persona. I just wish it had been under different circumstances…"

Akihiko knocked on the door to the bar once they were out in front of it. "Your sister is bringing us together again. And once all of this is over, I'm sure we could all be a family again, right?"

He was grateful that the door opened so he didn't have to catch the sadness that spread over Makoto's face when his voice cracked. Lala smiled as she usually did, then stretched her arm to where Mitsuru and Fuuka had been waiting for them.

"You come into this place with a new girl every time," Lala laughed. "You look a lot like your mother, dear."

Makoto jumped beside him, giving him a surprised look as she took a step behind him. "It's alright, Makoto." He rotated his body so he could push her to stand in front of him. "Lala is a good friend." Then he sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "And a very good

guesser…”

“O-Oh…” Makoto stumbled over her apology and her introduction, to which Lala waved her off and laughed lightly. He stopped her from pouring a drink for him, then gave Makoto a glass of water.

Before he could usher Makoto into the booth, Fuuka came out and stood in front of her with a wide smile. “It’s so nice to meet you!” Fuuka then wrapped her arms around Makoto and hugged her tightly before pulling away. “I’m sorry. I suppose it was rude of me to be so affectionate when I haven’t introduced myself.”

Makoto shook her head. “N-No, I-I’m sorry. I…I’m not really…good at meeting new people…”

“Like father, like daughter,” Mitsuru added with a smirk. Fuuka laughed quietly into her hand. The tension returned to his heart when Mitsuru eyed him with a narrowing gaze. “Why did you bring her here?”

Akihiko opened his mouth to answer, but it was Makoto who responded in his moment of hesitation. “I told you that Sis was in trouble. I want to help her. Dad wants to help her. So…I thought… since he wouldn’t be able to explain *why* I know that, I wanted to come here and tell you myself.”

Makoto took a deep breath, but Fuuka nodded her head. “Mitsuru has told us there’s something weird happening with the world, but we really don’t have a good grasp at what’s going on.” Fuuka slid into the booth, then Akihiko followed in after Makoto.

“I’m afraid I’m not an expert, so I may not be able to explain it well.”

When he noticed Makoto’s hands fidgeting on her lap, Akihiko put a hand on her arm. “It’s alright, Makoto. I’m sure what you know is more than we do.”

Mitsuru nodded across the table. “I apologize if you thought I was being cold to you the other night, but I can understand your hesitations. So please, tell us what you know and what we don’t learn from you now, we can investigate.”

“Shouldn’t we wait for Ken?” Fuuka asked. “He said he would be a little late, but I think it would be hard to explain this to him outside of a safe place like this.”

Mitsuru reached up and tapped her phone with a finger. “He told us not to wait on his behalf.” Then her eyes lifted to meet his. “You spoke to him this morning, yes?”

“Yeah,” he said quietly. “I had to tell someone…” He could feel Makoto sit a little closer to him, an action that made him take a deep breath to gather his thoughts on what he *could* do rather than what had already been *done.*

“Well, if it’s alright with you, Makoto,” Mitsuru spoke, breaking the silence. “Tell us what you know.”

Chapter 61

Chapter 61

I hope to have the rest of this monster uploaded by the end of my weekend. So get ready. That's a lot of chapters. 😈

The trip to Kasumigaseki was done in silence.

Mitsuru appeared to be mulling over what Makoto had told them a few minutes ago. Fuuka sat beside her, her phone in both of her hands while her fingers moved frantically on the screen. Akihiko sat next to Makoto across the train from the other two, trapped in his own thoughts, his own memories, and his own fears.

You've destroyed your daughter's life…

Makoto would occasionally place her hand over his as if to tell him *it's okay.* The best thing he could offer her in return was a weak smile, something he knew didn't keep her from worrying. It wasn't until Makoto actually squeezed his hand, *told* him everything was going to be okay, that he realized he was more of a wreck than he thought.

But he had to be strong. Makoto shouldn't need to feel obligated to carry her own concerns *and* his, even though she was doing a fantastic job. Because he was a *horrible* father…

"Let's go help Sis, Dad."

Akihiko nodded his head and stood with Makoto, but he never registered either action. Hell, he didn't know they had reached their stop until he was practically drug out of the train car. He didn't register anything; not the slightly painful grip on his wrist, his back colliding with some solid surface, but for some odd reason, he came

to when he felt the familiar cold stare of a pissed off Kirijo.

“You need to snap out of it, or I’m going to have someone take you back. You will be no use to us in the condition you’re in.”

Akihiko’s eyes scanned the four people around him (when did Ken get there?) and each pair of eyes held a different level of emotion. But despite Mitsuru’s bone-chilling glare, Makoto’s was far more damaging.

“Sis needs you. You can’t run away from her now or she’ll never forgive you.” Her blazing red eyes narrowed further. “ *I’ll* never forgive you.”

Her tone was the slap to the face he needed. The world suddenly came back into focus and his change must have been apparent from how the others’ reacted. “Thank you, Makoto.” But what he refused to tell anyone, or try to make known, was that deep down, he was still terrified.

Fuuka smiled cheerfully at him. “You’re not alone here, Akihiko. We all want to help.”

“So let’s get going!” Ken seemed to be the one with the most amount of energy, so he chose to lead their small group out of the station. Makoto walked next to him, her head lowered, eyes cast to the ground, her hands balled up into fists at her side.

He was curious to know how many more stabs to his heart he could take in one day before he bled to death. “I’m sorry you feel like you need to shoulder my worries, Makoto.” She at least looked over at him. “But at the same time, I’m grateful to know you’re here. Don’t ever hesitate to yell at me tonight, okay?”

Makoto’s eyes fell back to the ground. “I wish I could make you understand that this isn’t your fault.”

Akihiko could only choke out a weak laugh. “Well, if it’s my fault, that means I have to fix it, right?”

“Sis would have turned out like this with or without a reason to be angry with you.” Her eyes locked with his again. “While I don’t want

to say that, Sis knows right from wrong. Sis knows that you've done nothing wrong. So we're going to help her, because we love her and we need her to know that."

His exhale caused him to stop in his place. "Sometimes I really do believe you're the only thing keeping our family together."

Makoto shook her head. "I honestly believe *you* are what keeps us together."

Akihiko had nothing to say in response to her, but by the time he found his voice again, they had all reached the front of the courthouse. While he was thankful to some degree that he could turn his attention to a fight, maybe, he was again struck by *whom* he would be fighting.

"So, what do we do now?"

Ken turned to Makoto, who stepped into the middle of the group. "We'll need to enter the Metaverse somewhere out of the way."

"And how do we do that?"

Makoto held out her phone to show Ken the weird app she had shown them earlier. "Once we find a safe place to go in, we just need to say the name, the place, and the distortion into the phone and we will be there."

Ken's confused expression brought a small laugh from Mitsuru. "I'm sure it will make more sense if we see this for ourselves."

Fuuka nodded in agreement. "It's been so long since we've done anything like this. Tonight's mission shall be recon only, okay?"

Akihiko almost threw up.

The five of them stood beside an isolated bench on the side of the courthouse, off the main strip and for the moment, silent. Makoto held out her phone while Ken and Fuuka peered over her shoulder to watch the supposed "magic" take place. Mitsuru came to stand by his side.

“I can only imagine what you’re thinking, but if this is the only way to help Sae, you need to fight. We are all here for you. Do not forget that.”

He muttered a quiet, “thanks,” before Makoto’s voice reached his ears.

“Sae Niijima.”

She took a deep breath. Ken and Fuuka looked on in wonder. “Courthouse.”

Mitsuru took a step closer to him once his fists started to shake.

“Casino.”

The next second, there was a strange, but yet not unfamiliar, sensation that passed through his body and nearly brought him to his knees. The world spun together, making him dizzy and disoriented enough that he lost his balance. Had Mitsuru not been standing next to him, he probably would have fallen over.

It was an extremely long minute of confusion and trying to find his bearings, but once it was over, everything was much worse. The air was too thick. It was too cold. The scene before him lacked any colors. Where the hell were they?

“Oh shit!” Ken’s voice was a small comfort, even if his shout scared Akihiko half to death. “What the hell was all of that?”

“This is what happens when we come here.” Hearing Makoto’s voice helped to pull him out of the rest of his confusion. “I wish I could say it gets better with time, but…I’m afraid it doesn’t.”

Fuuka took a few steps closer to Ken. “Wow, this place is kind of scary!”

“How did you take us here with a phone?”

Mitsuru’s voice cut through the night (it was night, right?). “While I’m curious about that as well, it can also be answered later.”

Akihiko chose to tune out the conversation and take in the rest of his surroundings. The police station was across the street, or at least, it looked like the police station. For the most part, the area looked exactly as it had before they had been transported into this world, just darker, haunted. Had they moved at all? Or were they just seeing things differently now because of some weird power?

“This is so messed up,” Ken said, his head moving in circles as he tried to make sense of the situation. “Where the hell are we? Why does it feel like we didn’t go anywhere? But I felt so sick…please tell me I wasn’t the only one?”

Akihiko was the first to acknowledge him. “No, I felt it, too. But everything does look exactly the same.” He looked over at Makoto. “Why?”

From the corner of his eyes, he saw Mitsuru place a hand under her chin. “This is so strange. This is not the Dark Hour, but yet, there are several similarities.”

“This is the Metaverse,” Makoto replied. Then, her hand pointed towards where the courthouse had been. “And *that* is a palace.”

Akihiko turned to face said building and he almost fell back in awe. How the hell it was so dark on one side of the street and so *bright* on the other? But more than that, the grandiose and gaudy building was *huge,* standing at least twenty stories high. The neon lights flashed brightly, almost to the point it hurt to look at them. The entire scene made his head pound and his stomach twist and his lungs *burn* .

“And this is how Sae views the courthouse?” He was happy that Mitsuru had voiced the question he was unable to. He was desperate to know what the *fuck* was happening, why it was happening, and what he needed to do to help his daughter. He had never been to a casino, but he had walked into and passed by his fair share of pachinko parlors to know that there was very little *danger* involved with them. But, if he learned anything from Tartarus, he knew better than to charge in blindly.

“Um…y-yes…”

Makoto's hesitation did not go unnoticed. "Is something wrong?"

Her eyes met with his own. "We're likely going to see a shadow version of Sae at some point in our investigation." Makoto dropped her head. "I want you to be prepared for what's going to happen, but…I'm afraid I don't know what to expect."

Akihiko closed the distance between the two of them and dropped his hand on her shoulder. "I'm assuming this won't be easy, but I have you all here. I'm here with you, Makoto. Whatever happens, we will face it together, okay?"

When she nodded her head with a growing smile, he turned back to the building with a new wave of determination. He didn't have to go through this alone, and he sure as hell wasn't going to be useless when both of his daughters were depending on him to be *strong* . It may have been easier said than done, but Makoto was there for him. His friends were there for him. When all of this was done, Minako would be there for him.

And if everything went as planned, *Sae* would be there for him.

Mitsuru told them to keep to the shadows and building walls and to expect the unexpected. It was hard to do when there was very little darkness and Akihiko was losing his mind and Ken seemed to be impressed with every little thing as they approached the casino.

This is how Sae sees the courthouse, huh?

What did that even *mean?*

"Stop."

The sharpness of Mitsuru's tone was enough to get him to do just that. They had all reached the last of the cover, so any forward movement could send them into a trap or set off alarms to let someone know they were there. Would Sae come out and try and fight them? How could Sae be at work *and* in this odd world?

A Shadow Sae…

Akihiko thought he was going to be sick.

“We need to be prepared for an ambush the second we step out of the shadows.” Mitsuru gave them all a once over, then nodded her head. “I will go first. Wait until the coast is clear before the rest of you follow.”

“I’m not sensing any danger here,” Fuuka added, her eyes closed and hands drawn together. “But please, be careful. Something doesn’t feel right.”

Akihiko wanted to be the one to take the first step, but Mitsuru gave him a cold stare to keep him in his place. She said nothing to him as she walked out into the light and up to the front of the building. Nothing happened. That was a good start. Akihiko then watched as she approached the two men on each side of the door. They were dressed like security guards; sunglasses, dark suits, standing perfectly straight and still at their post, arms crossed over their chests. Mitsuru surprised him when she continued to walk right up to them, but he was too far away to sense if they were bad news or just doing their job.

Fuuka tried to tell him not to charge ahead, but he did anyway. One of the men looked over Mitsuru’s shoulder as he approached, which made *her* turn around to face him with an angry glare. “What are you doing?”

“You need authorization to enter.”

Akihiko ignored Mitsuru’s gaze and walked around her. “I need to see Sae.”

“Akihiko.”

The two security guards looked at each other. “You need authorization to enter.”

Well, he was a cop, and he had his badge with him, so maybe that would convince them to let him through? “I need to see Sae,” he said, flashing his badge to the man in front of him. “Let me through.”

Both men stood in silence, either ignoring him or thinking. Several seconds later, the man he had shown his badge to smiled darkly at

him. “Finally coming to see your daughter, Sanada-san?”

Akihiko recoiled at his words. How the hell did they know that? Did that mean Sae was in danger? The other guard stepped up to him and pulled him out of his shock. “We must protect Sae-san.” His hand went to his ear and Akihiko could have sworn Mitsuru said something to him. “You are not allowed in. Kill him.”

The next second, Mitsuru was yanking on his arm to pull him away from the two men. Both guards suddenly grabbed their heads, drawing in some strange black energy, and when he blinked, they were far from human. Both had white masks covering where their faces would be. One was wielding a pistol. The other was wielding a knife.

“Protect Sae-san! Kill him!”

Akihiko’s first reaction was to send his fist into the center of the closest one’s stomach. It felt weird, like he was punching rubber, and it made an even weirder sound when he struck it. To his disappointment, the yellow eyes glared back at him, as if unfazed by his initial attack, then lifted the knife in its hand.

He was extremely thankful that his leg had healed enough to evade the strike as he fell back a few paces to regroup with the rest of the team that joined him at the entrance.

Mitsuru stood directly behind him. “It’s a Shadow…”

He saw Makoto come to stand next to him. “We need to fight them, but…I-I don’t know how to summon my persona without my mask.”

“ *Can* we even summon ours anymore?!”

It had been years, but Akihiko was sure that if he pushed hard enough, Caesar would reveal himself again. He had to. Akihiko doubted that he could physically take out the two shadows after the one seemed immune to his strikes.

He had called Caesar with his evoker. He had called Caesar with willpower alone. If he had been able to do it once, he could do it again. He *had* to do it again. The two shadows stood between him

and his desire to help his *daughter* . If a fight would put him inside the building and one step closer to saving Sae, then he would fight. And he knew he needed his persona to *win* .

Akihiko didn't have long, but for a few seconds, he knew he had no choice but to try and reach down into whatever depths he had to to call upon his persona. He tried to close off all of his senses, as hard as it was, to *focus* . He knew Caesar was there, somewhere, as he had been weakly stirring up inside of him for months.

If he failed to summon Caesar, he ran the risk of losing Sae forever.

If he failed to summon Caesar, he wouldn't be able to protect Makoto from the shadows that went after her.

I need your help.

Please!

He had to push a little bit harder, but then he felt it. That small burst of energy that knocked the wind out of his lungs. Akihiko lifted his head just in time to realize that the two shadows were right in front of him, but he was ready now. He could feel Caesar's electrifying strength as he retreated back into his mind to call him out.

There was a flash of light in front of them, followed by an ear-splitting *crack* as the bolt of lightning hit its mark. The shadow on the right disappeared in a second. The other turned its head to the empty space before its eyes landed back on him.

It was a pity that Akihiko had forgotten how long it had been since he had called upon such a power and he fell forward from exhaustion. Makoto came to stand in front of him, her stance ready for a physical attack. As much as his heart swelled with pride at the sight of her putting their training to use, he desperately wanted her to run. He couldn't do much at the moment, likely wouldn't be able to until the next day, but he couldn't even *speak* .

But thankfully, Makoto never had to land a strike (or get hurt herself) as a giant wall of ice encased the shadow. When it shattered, so did the enemy. He caught Makoto turning to her side where Mitsuru was

standing, but then she shook off her shock and fell to her knees in front of him.

“Are you okay?”

He felt a small smile work its way onto his face. “Can’t say I expected that.”

“That was so amazing, Akihiko! And Mitsuru!”

Ken chimed in with Fuuka. “Man, now I’m jealous I didn’t get my chance…”

Mitsuru chuckled next to him. “It appears we need more practice if we’re going to be lasting longer than one attack.”

Akihiko grumbled under his breath, but then he came to his feet with Makoto’s help. “Regardless of how you put it, it’s nice to know I can summon him again.”

“I do believe you went overboard.”

He heard Ken laugh behind him. “Still, that was epic to see. Even if you are a little out of it.”

He turned his eyes over to Mitsuru. “You’re not tired at all?”

To add salt to his wounded pride, Mitsuru brushed her hair over her shoulder with a smirk. “Apparently, someone is getting too old.”

That was when he noticed how *pale* Makoto looked. Akihiko felt his stomach twist into a knot. He had forgotten how terrified Makoto had been of thunder. “I’m sorry, Makoto.”

She tried to cover it up with a shake of her head, but the fear was eminent on her face. “I-I-It’s okay…”

“It didn’t hurt you, did it?”

God, Akihiko would feel terrible if his attack had done any damage to his *daughter.* And even though she shook her head again, he had a feeling she was lying. “It just, scared me…is all.”

He wrapped an arm around her and Makoto rested her head against his chest. Ken approached them from behind and came to stand between him and the building. “So, do we go inside?”

He glanced over to Mitsuru, who looked to be debating over her options. “I don’t think it’s a good idea, given our weaknesses as a unit right now. I was careless in planning for this, and a day to rest and regroup would be wise.”

“No.” Akihiko turned his body to face a surprised Mitsuru. “We haven’t learned anything. Other than we can still summon our personas. We have to keep looking around.”

“You’re in no shape to-,”

“I’m *fine,”* he interrupted through gritted teeth. “I could do it again if I have to.”

Mitsuru’s eyes narrowed. “I would rather you not.”

“Maybe we can just *look* around?” All eyes turned to Fuuka, who then looked away shyly. “I-I mean…as strange as it may sound, I don’t sense anything from out here. Maybe if we go inside, I could find something?”

Mitsuru’s eyes landed on him once more, but then she sighed heavily. “Alright. We will *look* inside, but no more fighting. It will only be a last resort, then we escape.”

The walk to the front doors was the longest walk of his life. At first, Akihiko assumed it was his lack of energy after an overly powerful (and unexpected) Ziodyne. But the cloud in his mind began to grow heavier and heavier until he was pretty sure he was carrying every single person on his back after working out nonstop for a week.

Makoto had told them this was how Sae saw the courthouse. It made no sense, but nothing about this strange phenomenon made sense, ever. The only thing that made sense was that Sae’s employees, if that’s what they were, wanted to protect her from *him* .

How many times did she have to suffer *alone* because of him?

How many times could he have reached out to her and *helped* her?

How many of her colleagues had been there for her when *he* wasn't?

The front doors slid open and Akihiko was the first one to step inside the expansive lobby. There was a moment where his vision blurred and that sick feeling hit his stomach, albeit weaker, as it did when they were first tossed into the Metaverse.

"Am I going crazy here?" Ken asked quietly.

He saw Makoto shake her head. "No. This is her version of the courthouse, so sometimes reality blends in with her cognition." Then he felt her eyes on him. "Are you okay?"

It took more strength to nod his head than it did to summon Caesar. "I'm fine."

"Do you sense anything, Fuuka?"

"Hmm." Fuuka was quiet for a few seconds, but then she sighed. "No, I don't. At least, nothing I can pinpoint precisely. I haven't had to use my persona like this in so long…it might take me a while…"

While the others began discussing the situation they found themselves in, Akihiko decided to wander around. Mitsuru weakly called out to try and stop him from leaving the group, but he ignored her and walked a few steps forward. There was no one around, as odd as that was for a place as extravagant as the casino. Was that an omen that something was about to happen? Or was no one allowed to enter the building because Sae wouldn't let *anyone* close to her?

He didn't make it too far before a voice called out. "I wasn't expecting unauthorized guests to waltz right through the front door."

He was pretty sure he heard Makoto gasp, but the minute his eyes landed on Sae, everything else faded into the background.

The first thing he wanted to do was take off his jacket and give it to her. What in god's name was she even *wearing?* There was a

terrifying grin on her face, something that made his stomach turn violently. Her eyes were *cold,* that same haunting yellow color he had seen long ago in a pitiful reflection of himself. They were pointed right at him, like she knew who he was and what he had done to her life, all while looking *through* him at the same time.

It made it that much harder to find his voice. “S-Sae?”

She took a few steps towards him, but the world began to blur and his head started pounding. He knew he needed to get out of there, but…Sae was *right there!* He had to try and talk to her. He would *not* cower away from her again.

“So tell me, how are you all enjoying the casino?”

What? Maybe she needed a conversation to break the ice? Did she know who he was, or was this “shadow version” unaware he even existed? “Um, it’s…big?”

Sae chuckled at him, then turned her head to look around the room. “So many people come to visit this place every day. But never him.”

Akihiko’s heart clenched in his chest. Was she referring to *him?* She had to be. Right? Was one visit to her bizarre casino not enough at this point? “Sae, I…I’m right here.”

She either ignored him or didn’t hear him. “Every day, I walk around the entire casino, inspecting the patrons, hoping he will be here, and that I’ve finally earned his respect.” She started to laugh quietly to herself and it was extremely hard not to physically reach out to her. “All of this, and it’s not enough. So many people can show up and be awed at what I’ve done, but their thoughts mean nothing. All of *this* has been for nothing, yet I can’t give up until I can hear him tell me how proud he is of me.”

“Dad!”

Akihiko could feel his own arm moving to reach out to Sae, his vision hazy and his heart burning. “Sae…I-I am proud of you…”

“I want him to look at me for who I am; his daughter. A *Sanada* .”

“Akihiko!”

Was he dying? He sure felt like he was. “…Sae…I-I’m so sorry…”

In a flash, Sae turned back to him, her eyes glowing in a rage and condensing the air around them enough to knock the breath out of him. Even as the shadow version of his daughter laughed like a maniac, all he wanted to do was pull her into his chest and tell her over and over how *sorry* he was .

Her fist slammed up against the wall as two more black figures rose from the ground. “Sae Sanada already lived once, but she’s *dead!* He *killed* her! That weak little child would *never* become great, like a *Niijima!* I never want to see him! *Ever!”*

Something collided into him, knocking him to the ground before one of the shadows could strike him. There were noises of a fight in the background, but Akihiko was still reeling from the fall and Sae’s words. Was…was that how she felt about him? That…that he *killed* her? Is that why the guards in front of the casino tried to *kill* him, to keep him from hurting her?

It was impossible to breathe. His throat burned. His vision was darkening. There was a slight pain in his side from being hit, but he couldn’t think straight enough to know what had struck him. There were more voices, growing louder, until there was a weight under his shoulders lifting him off the ground.

“Ken, grab Makoto. We need to get out of here *now* .”

Makoto?

“Snap out of it, Akihiko. Get up!”

Things started to come back to him, but the first thing he saw was Ken, bending down next to him and wrapping his arms around his daughter. Makoto appeared to be unconscious, and that alone was enough to get him to sit up.

Another cold wave crashed into him when he realized that Makoto had been the one to knock him to the ground, the enemy attack likely meant for him slicing through her shoulder. The wound looked

deep enough to require attention, but hopefully it wasn't life-threatening. When Ken was able to stand while supporting his daughter, Akihiko caught the red stain on his shirt from where she had bled onto him.

"Get up, Akihiko!"

I killed my children…

"Sanada!"

I killed my children…

Crystals of ice appeared in front of him and arms wrapped under his to pull him up. "Get. Up!"

Sae was dead. She said so herself. The blood stain on his shirt… Makoto was dead, too…

The ice shattered. Two dead looking monsters charged after him.

My children…

"How the fuck do we get out of here?!"

"Artemisia!"

A blur of dark red filled his vision. "Akihiko, if you don't get up *now* we are *all* going to die in here!" His face suddenly burned. "Wake up!"

"T-They…they're dead…"

Something cold grabbed onto his face. "Listen to me. Makoto will be fine if we get out of here. This isn't Sae. You're in a state of shock right now. Everything will be alright, but you need to *be strong* and get up."

"This damn app won't take us out of here unless we're at the exit!" Was that Ken? "We need to get through the door! Come on, Sanada! It's *right there!"*

With Mitsuru's help, he was able to stand on his feet, but then everything fell apart again when he took one last look at Sae.

"I am a *Niijima* and *Niijima's* always prevail, no matter what the cost!"

Her laughter was the last thing he heard before the world twisted and he didn't have the strength to remain conscious on the other side.

Chapter 62

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The last time she received a call from Mitsuru when Akihiko and Makoto had been late returning home, she told Minako that Akihiko had been shot because Makoto had charged into a criminal's hideout.

She should have known better than to trust that Akihiko wouldn't charge head-first into a fight to save their other daughter. "Do I want to know what happened?"

Minako got quite a different response this time around. "I need you to meet me at the hospital. Makoto has been injured and is currently getting stitches to her wound."

"W-What?!"

"Makoto is going to be fine, but…I need you here for Akihiko."

There was a sadness to her voice that made Minako's heart clench painfully in her chest. "Please tell me they're okay."

Mitsuru was quick to answer. "Makoto was injured during our investigation. The doctors assure me she's going to be fine. Physically, Akihiko is fine, but, I'm afraid I'm failing to try to get through to him."

Minako ended the conversation and headed out the second her phone was secured in her bag. She had no idea how Makoto could have gotten hurt, where she was hurt, how *bad* she was hurt, but any amount of damage would have been done tenfold to Akihiko. The fact Mitsuru couldn't "get through" to him worried her even more.

She put the rest of her thoughts and questions on hold, as much as she could, until she knew more *facts* . Nothing would make her more restless and sick to her stomach than spinning tales in her head that

had no truth to them. At least, for the moment.

The blast of air-conditioning once she stepped into the hospital served as a slap to the face. She was about to rush up to the nurses' station when she heard someone call out to her.

When she turned her head, Ken stood beside her. "Ken?"

Ken was always so full of energy and smiles and joy whenever he was a child, and he was the same when she had last been out with him. To see the expression he wore now created another tear in her heart. "Mitsuru told me to wait for you."

"Please tell me Makoto is okay."

Ken placed a tentative hand on her shoulder and one of hers flew to her mouth. "No, she's fine. She's going to be okay. I promise." Minako cried out in relief, drowning out Ken's quiet apologies, but he led her down the hallway of the emergency room until she was met with more familiar faces.

"Minako!"

Knowing that Makoto was okay, her arms quickly flew around Fuuka's neck and the other hugged her back just as hard. Her words were caught in her throat, but she knew Fuuka understood what she would have wanted to say.

When Minako pulled back in her arms, she had tears in her eyes. "I know I shouldn't say this now, but, I'm so happy to see you again."

"I've missed you so much, Fuuka."

Ken cleared his throat next to her. "I missed you too, Minako."

A small laugh escaped her lips. Her hand lifted to his face and pulled at his cheek. "I missed you too, Ken-kun."

Fuuka giggled into her hand while Ken swatted her hand away. Their moment was short lived when Mitsuru came out of the room she was in and approached her with a solemn look in her eyes. "I apologize for interrupting."

Fuuka and Ken took a step back. It was hard to keep her eyes on Mitsuru's. "I-Is she okay?"

Mitsuru nodded slowly. "The doctor finished patching her up a while ago, but she was given some pain medication that put her out."

"Will she be able to come home tonight?"

"I'm not sure," Mitsuru said as she broke eye contact. "It's already very late and I know the doctor wants to do at least one more check on her before he will let her leave for the night."

Minako leaned up against the wall, knowing that if she sat down, it would be too hard to get back up. "What happened?" Her eyes then looked up and down the hall before falling back on Mitsuru. "Where's Aki?"

The hall was eerily quiet, to the point where Minako could hear every one of their heartbeats. Mitsuru finally moved away from the door and gestured towards the room. "We encountered a shadow version of Sae." Minako's eyes widened. "She claims that Akihiko killed her. That was when Makoto pushed him out of the way and was injured. All he keeps saying is that *they're dead* ."

The tears lined her eyes again, but Mitsuru nodded towards the room and Minako followed her silent advice. A few drops fell as she caught sight of her youngest daughter laying on her left side, an IV running into her right arm, but otherwise relatively peaceful.

Akihiko was a different story.

He sat by Makoto's bedside in a chair he had pulled from the edge of the room to be closer to her. Both of his hands held his head, his fingers clenching and unclenching through his hair. He was slowly rocking back and forth, something he did a lot when he was close to his breaking point. She couldn't see his face, but judging by the rest of his body language, she didn't want to.

Minako did a quick scan of her daughter, then put her bag down by the chair Akihiko was sitting on. There was enough room between the bed and the chair for her to kneel down in front of him and she

placed her hands on his legs to balance herself.

“Aki?”

When he didn’t appear to notice or hear her, she grabbed his wrists and pulled on his hands. “Aki, it’s okay.”

In the entire time she had known Akihiko, she had never seen him more *broken* . Not even after Shinjiro had died. Not even after he told her about his sister. Not even after she walked away from him when he told her he was afraid to marry her. Not even after Sae had walked out of their life.

The first thought that ran through her head was that this time, she wasn’t going to be able to fix him. She moved her hands to his face and fought harder than she felt she needed to so she wouldn’t *cry* . “It’s okay, Aki. Everything is okay now.”

He was looking right at her, but looking right through her at the same time. “They’re dead…”

She physically felt her heart crack. “Aki, Makoto is right here, and she’s just sleeping right now.” She rotated her shoulder so he could see as much. She doubted he did. “Sae’s probably still at work, because she doesn’t like to sleep, just like you.”

“I killed her.”

“Honey,” she said with a more stern voice, trying to ignore the distant look in his eyes. “Sae is not dead. You didn’t kill her. You *love* her.”

“I killed my own children.”

She couldn’t lose heart. If she lost heart this early on, Akihiko would never pull out of this. “Makoto is fine.” She suddenly came to her feet, walked behind him, and reached over his shoulders to grab his face. “Look, she’s *fine* . She’s just as strong as you are and she’s going to be alright.”

Minako felt something wet on her fingers. “I…I…she’s *dead* .”

By the time she rounded the corner of the chair, Akihiko buried his face into his hands. As awkward and uncomfortable as it was, she sat down in his lap, wrapped her arms around his neck, and held onto him with a gentle, yet firm grip.

“I promise she’s not dead. She’s going to be okay.” She rested her chin on the top of his head while her fingers tried to soothe him by stroking over his hair. “I promise.”

“I-I’m going to…kill you…”

She sat up straight, yanked his hands away from his face, and forced him to look up at her. “You will never hurt your children. You will never hurt me. Because you *love* us.” Her grip tightened when he tried to shake her off. “Look at me, Akihiko.”

It was unbearably hard to look at him in the state he was in. He had always been so strong, mentally and physically, given everything he had been through in his life. When one person left his life, he pushed on harder. So what had happened between him and this shadow Sae that finally caused him to *snap?*

Regardless of the *what* and the *why,* Minako feared that nothing she would do would bring him back. But she had to *try* . “No one who loves his children as much as you do would ever do anything to harm them.” She leaned in to place a kiss to the middle of his forehead, then rested hers against his. “I love you. I always will. Your children love you.”

It was never easy consoling him over the topic of his children, but she *knew* he was losing steam and that was the sign he was coming back around. Her fingers brushed through his hair again as he leaned into her and cried. She kept repeating how much she loved him, how much his daughters loved him, even when she was sure he couldn’t hear her. Her lips lingered by the crown of his head, occasionally pausing in her words to lightly kiss him, letting him know that she *meant* what she was saying.

The doctor came into the room almost two hours later. Minako couldn’t tell if Akihiko had fallen asleep or had calmed down enough to be still again. Either way made her feel so much better, but she

worried that if he was awake, the doctor's presence would send him spiraling back into the hell she might have just pulled him out of.

The doctor spoke kindly to her. "I would like to do a final check on her in the morning, since it's late and I'm unsure how much healing has happened in the past few hours."

When Akihiko never stirred in her arms, she assumed he was asleep. "How bad was it?"

The elderly man's eyes fell to the clipboard in his hand. "The laceration was deep enough to damage some of the muscle, but a few days' rest and some simple stretching should be able to keep her mobile."

Minako released her breath as calmly as she could. "Does she have to stay here tonight?"

"If she regains consciousness within the hour, I would be more willing to ask her. However, she's in quite a deal of pain and I wouldn't be able to get her the proper medication until morning." The doctor smiled politely. "I can arrange for a bed, if you would like to wait here with her."

Truth be told, she could sleep as she was, curled up on Akihiko's lap, but a bed did sound wonderful. "I would appreciate that."

He bowed to her, then turned and walked out of the room as quietly as he had come. Minako took the chance to carefully pry Akihiko's head off her chest, and it was the first time since she walked into the hospital that she was *relieved* . Given his state of mind only minutes ago, he was sleeping just as peacefully as Makoto was in the bed next to them.

She didn't want to wake him, to bring him out of the comfort of the sleep he so desperately needed, but he didn't look all that comfortable sitting in the chair. So as soon as the second bed was placed in their room, she reminded herself that he would sleep better if he was laying down, then put both her hands on his shoulders to wake him up.

She barely had to move him at all before his eyes shot open and he looked around the room in a daze. To hopefully calm him back down, she sat on his lap again and draped one arm over his shoulders. “I didn’t want to wake you, but they brought us a bed to sleep on.” She kissed the top of his head. “I thought you would like that better.”

A small amount of sadness returned to her heart when he realized where he was. Maybe she shouldn’t have woken him up at all. But when she stood and held out her hands to pull him up as well, he reached out and took both her hands in his.

It wasn’t a comfortable bed, not surprising, but there was something oddly calming about having Akihiko in her arms, asleep only minutes later, and Makoto laying not too far away.

But even as she counted Akihiko’s breaths, counted how long they stayed in rhythm with Makoto’s, she couldn’t shake off the ominous cloud in her mind so she could sleep herself.

She had to speak to Sae. She had to understand what was going on with her. Maybe if she spoke to Sae, her daughter would be able to explain what was happening so Minako knew how to help. Or, maybe Minako could talk some sense into Sae and whatever shadow Akihiko and Makoto had met that night would disappear on its own.

She laughed sadly to herself.

Sae was *her* daughter. Someone who was stubborn, didn’t enjoy listening to someone else tell them how to do something. Minako knew that it wouldn’t be easy. But she had to try, if not for Sae’s sake, then for her sister’s, and for her father’s.

Although Minako felt like she had slept for a solid five minutes, when she woke up, she was alone on the bed. It took another few minutes to come to enough to realize Akihiko wasn’t even in the room. The sun was shining through the blinds covering the window, but Makoto was apparently still asleep. She searched for her phone to find the time, hoping that Akihiko had only left because he had to go into work.

She found out that yes, it was around ten in the morning, but that's not what she saw first. There was a small text from Akihiko, and she willed herself not to cry over a few choice words.

I didn't want to wake you to tell you something you already know, but, I love you.

Please keep me informed on Makoto's condition.

The little things he did always brought the biggest smile to her face. She did her very best not to seem so happy while her daughter was unconscious in a hospital bed and missing her first ever day of school, but as of right now, no one was looking at her to judge her any differently.

Minako flopped back on the bed and the impact caused a sigh of relief to fly out of her mouth. She clutched her phone to her chest, desperate to reply to him to let him know she read his message. But she also didn't want to send him false hope that Makoto was going home and perfectly fine if it wasn't actually happening.

Then, she thought she heard Makoto stirring awake. Her voice was soft, but Minako could have sworn Makoto had called out to her. She was at her daughter's bedside the next second.

"You're okay, honey. Just…" She carefully and gently pushed her back down into the mattress when Makoto tried to sit up. "Don't try to move too much, okay?"

"Wh-Where am…I?"

Minako lowered herself down onto the bed. "You're in the hospital. You were hurt pretty bad last night." She brushed some of Makoto's hair out of her face. "Do you remember what happened?"

Makoto's eyes widened, the haze of sleep and confusion disappearing in a second. "Where's Dad? Is he okay?"

"He's fine." Minako had to hold Makoto by her shoulders to calm her down. "He's at work right now. But I'm sure he will be happy to know you're awake."

When she saw the tears lining Makoto's eyes, Minako's heart came to a stop. Makoto's left hand wiped at her eyes as she tried to hide her tears. "I'm scared for him."

Minako wouldn't tell her daughter that she may have been scared for him too, but Akihiko had to have been feeling better if he sent her that message, correct?

Or…had she misinterpreted it? He wouldn't have asked to be informed about Makoto's condition if he was going to do something stupid, right? He knew better. Makoto wasn't *dying* …

She suddenly realized Makoto was staring at her, waiting for some kind of answer. "He's okay, Makoto." Her mind started to spin trying to think of something better to say. "He was a little upset last night, but I think I managed to talk him out of it."

If anything, her own words brought back the dark cloud into her heart again. Was Akihiko really at work? Did he finally get pushed too far that he was beyond repair? Is that why he chose to text her rather than wake her?

The haunting feeling never went away as the doctor came in to check up on Makoto, giving her some *do's* and *don'ts* until she could return for another examination. The rest of the conversation died in her mind as she began to feel her heart pound out of control.

The last time she worried about Akihiko to this extent had been right after Sae walked out of their life. But even then, he was able to straighten his back and tell her he would be okay (even when she knew it wouldn't be easy).

Last night may have been more terrifying than she wanted to admit.

"M-Mom?"

Minako literally jumped in her seat, the same chair that she had sat with Akihiko the previous night. She didn't even realize she was crying until she felt a stray tear fall from her chin and onto her hand. Makoto continued to look at her with a heartbreaking amount of sorrow for someone who had their arm strapped to their stomach

and told not to move it for a few days.

So, she tried to play her own sadness off with a laugh. “Sorry. I’ve dealt with your dad getting hurt like this, but you’re different. You’re our little girl.” *Please don’t do anything stupid, Aki.* “I need to tell him you’re okay.”

“A-Am I going to miss all of school?”

This brought a genuine laugh out of her lungs. “I’m pretty sure your teachers will understand.” Minako then looked over at her. “Maybe we can swing by the school to pick up your homework.”

Makoto’s face paled and Minako’s heart dropped. “Oh. No. I-It’s okay…I-I don’t want anyone to see me…”

She didn’t have the heart to question Makoto any further, so she simply placed her arm around her back and began to escort her out of the room. The entire walk to the nurses’ station to check Makoto out, the walk to the train station, Minako had an extremely difficult time ignoring the weight in her bag. She had to call Akihiko, if only to check on him. She needed to hear his voice, no matter how depressed or angry or *broken* it was.

Makoto walked a few paces in front of her, and Minako took the chance to reach into her bag for her phone. For every second that passed with her phone pressed to her ear with no noise besides the ringer, she panicked. Her breathing became irregular. She could feel the blood vessels in her heart pounding against her ribs. That burning sensation blurred her vision. Her hand hurt from holding her phone as tightly as she had it.

But he didn’t pick up.

She tried again, coming to a stop in the middle of the walkway, uncaring of who she pissed off or who ran into her and yelled at her to get out of the way. Her throat began to constrict as a few tears fell from her eyes the longer she waited for Akihiko to *pick up the phone!*

The third time she called, she was hysterical. She was pretty sure

Makoto was tugging on her arm and saying something to her, but she couldn't make out her words. All she could think about was that she would never see him again, that he had *shattered* last night and disappeared from her life forever. And all she would have was one *damn* text message reminding her that he *loved* her…

Minako surprised Makoto when she bolted for the station. If he wouldn't pick up his phone, maybe he was busy. Maybe it was on silent and he didn't *know* . Akihiko wasn't *dead* , or *gone* , or *leaving her* because he *loved* his family. She needed to believe in him. Because the second she stopped, he would stop, too. They still had so much time together…

She practically tore down the doors to the police station and ran up to the startled young lady behind the desk. "I…I need to…I need to see him!"

Another young cop came up next to her and placed his hand in the crook of her arm. He was easy to shake off. "I need to see him!"

The only thing that kept Minako from falling to her knees had been when Makoto came up beside her and held onto her arm. Her voice was the physical rope Minako needed to pull herself out of the raging waters of her own imagination. Assuming it *was* her imagination.

"Akihiko Sanada." Makoto's grip got tight. "We need to speak to him."

It was like magic. Like sunshine. Like she finally found her traction on the icy roads. She heard her name in that confused, but *oh* so familiar tone that brought out her biggest smile ever. She didn't even care where she was, who was watching, who was judging, but she barreled into Akihiko the second he came into the lobby.

He was *warm* . He was *real.* He was *alive.* "Wh-What are you doing?"

She wept into his chest like he was brought back from the dead. "I was worried I was never going to see you again."

After allowing her to cry against him for a few hours (it sure felt that way), she felt his hands on her shoulders and he pushed her back. “You shouldn’t be here.”

Minako wiped her hand over her face. “You didn’t pick up your phone.” She battled another round of tears. “I called you…three times…and…and I panicked.”

“Makoto.” Akihiko’s voice was sharp and direct, but strangely quiet at the same time. “I’m sorry for what happened last night.” Great, now she was going to start crying again, even if Makoto had a strength about her that ignited something within Minako’s soul. “But I need you to take her home. I’ll leave as soon as I finish up here, alright?”

“Sanada!”

When Akihiko’s eyes darkened, Minako felt a chill run up her spine. It was all the warning she needed to turn to Makoto as the two of them walked back out of the building.

But Minako worried her presence had just sparked another set of problems her family didn’t need.

Chapter 63

Chapter 63

Ren was usually pretty good about tuning out whispers in the hallways at school. And he did, for the most part, until he heard something that made him stop in his tracks.

“I heard Niijima-senpai isn’t going to be at school today.”

“She has to be really sick to miss a day of school.”

“I don’t think she’s *ever* missed a day of school.”

“I don’t think a sickness would keep her down.”

“I hope she’s not dead.”

Ren ran into his homeroom and whipped out his phone while Morgana hopped into the desk. “I’m sure she’s fine, Ren. You know how the students are.”

He ignored Morgana completely as his fingers typed a frantic message to Makoto. *Please tell me you’re okay.*

The only thing that sucked about having sent the message was now he was going to have to wait however long to hear back from her. He hoped she was just sick, or something non-threatening so she could respond to him. He didn’t know what he would do if he hadn’t heard from her by the end of the school day.

He couldn’t tell if he was grateful for the distraction from *Alibaba* or not. Every time his phone would *ping* in his pocket, his heart almost flew through his chest. But it was never from Makoto. Most of them just unfriendly reminders that this *Alibaba* knew about them and if they didn’t create the desired change of heart on whoever this mysterious person had asked, they would turn him in.

Ren had no idea how the day managed to go as fast as it did, but

after the last bell rang with no message from Makoto, he began to panic. Did something happen to her? She had been very upset for a long time, putting more and more distance between her and their friends. He knew he hadn't been all that willing to speak to her after the festival, but…

He called her instead. He would never forgive himself if something had happened to her, small or big or nothing at all…She was scared to talk about whatever was bothering her. He shouldn't have used her silence as an excuse to push her away, or let her push *him* away. They could have studied together, or done a million other things that didn't require her to think about her problems.

But of course, he got upset with her for not being able to *trust* him.

And now he worried he would never have that chance again.

It was hard, much harder than he wanted it to be, but he pulled up the group message and asked to meet with everyone after school. Surprisingly, no one asked him about Makoto's absence, or offered their own two cents, and he stood beside both Ryuji and Ann as they made their way to their new hideout.

The question didn't remain unspoken for long. "Dude. Where do you think the Prez was today?"

Ren unconsciously tightened his hand around his phone in his pocket. Ann simply shook her head. "I hope she's okay. She's *never* missed a day of school before."

Ryuji's countenance dropped. "You think we should call her or something?"

"I already have." Ren had to clear his throat once the words were out of his mouth. "She hasn't responded to me yet."

"Don't worry, Ren," Ann piped in, coming to step closer to him. "I know she's been kind of distant lately, but I'm sure she's fine."

"Oh!" Ryuji added as his eyes grew wide. "I bet I could ask Sanada if she's alright!"

Ren wanted to stop him, but by the time he was able to lift his hand and open his mouth, Ryuji smiled as he pushed the *send* button on his phone. He *really* hoped that Ryuji didn't just create unnecessary worry where it wasn't needed. Even if it would be nice to know, no matter who he found out from…

Sadly, neither Ryuji's nor his phone went off before they reached Leblanc. It was extremely difficult to focus on the subject of Medjed and Alibaba when his mind wandered to Makoto. If something *had* happened to her, he would have heard something by now, right? Not baseless rumors from his peers.

But, Makoto's silence and now his next best alternative being quiet were making his heart heavier with every passing second.

He had no idea how he was able to hold a meeting. Morgana took over most of it, but as of right now, they had little to go on. Medjed was just annoying, but harmless. Alibaba wasn't dropping enough hints and only spoke to Ren during a specific time of day. So the feline member decided to call it a day, and if nothing changed by the next afternoon, they could take a trip to Mementos to wear off some aggression.

And just before the meeting officially adjourned, Ryuji's phone went off. Ann and Morgana both laughed comically when Ryuji fell back in his chair and crashed into the floorboards at the sound. The blond rubbed the back of his head, but Ren waited impatiently for him to pick up his phone.

The moment Ryuji's eyes sparkled, Ren couldn't contain his curiosity. "Is it from Sanada? Is Makoto okay?"

Ryuji's thumb moved over the screen as he read the message, but *finally* , he nodded his head. "Yeah. Says she should be at school tomorrow. Doesn't say what happened though."

Ren felt every ounce of air in his lungs leave with his exhale. His hands shot over his face the next second. It took him a moment or two to compose himself well enough to lower them back to the table. "I'm glad to know she's okay."

“If I might ask, who is this ‘Sanada’ character you both speak of?”

Ryuji was the one to answer Yusuke’s question. “He’s a super cool cop friend of mine. You guys remember the dude who chased after Makoto, yeah?”

Yusuke reached out for his discarded snacks on the table. “How did you become friends with both an adult *and* a cop?”

“He loves beef bowl!” Ryuji cracked a smile. “Plus, he’s been there for me, ya know? I feel like that’s how he knows Makoto, because he reaches out to younger kids to help them and stuff.”

Ren could easily see that being the case, knowing that Makoto had lost her parents at some point in her life. Ryuji had made the comment to him that Sanada had been a great father-figure, so maybe in some way, Makoto thought the same.

“Guys, he has a persona, too.”

The entire room was filled with one, giant, surprised gasp. “W-W-What?!”

Morgana sat down in the middle of the table. “And he’s not the only one we know about.” Three pairs of widening eyes turned to him. The cat continued to speak. “I have no idea what any of this means, and while I want to trust them, they could have connections to the guy with the black mask we’ve been hearing about.”

“Woah, woah, wait…Sanada has a *persona?!”* Ren should have known Ryuji would likely lose his mind over the news. What he *didn’t* expect was for his friend to jump up and down like a small child on their birthday. “Oh, hell yeah! I *have* to know more about this now!”

“Sit down!” Morgana’s tone didn’t do much to dampen Ryuji’s excitement, but he at least listened and took his seat. “So far, there are a total of two others with this power, too. Until we can say for a fact that they aren’t at odds with us or sneaking into palaces and causing chaos, we should be careful about what we say around them.”

“They don’t understand you, Morgana.” Ren noticed the way both

Sanada and Amada had given him a questioning look, likely *hearing* a cat, but not understanding any words. Which meant they hadn't stepped into the Metaverse. Which meant they had nothing to do with the "black mask" culprit, or whoever he was.

Morgana, however, shook his head. "If they're professionals, which is likely given their ages, they could have acted confused to throw you off."

Ryuji's hand slapped against the table. "The hell are you tryin' to say, man? Sanada is a *good* guy! Ain't no way he'd be doin' that kind of shit!"

"I know how you feel, Ryuji," Morgana said with a stern voice. "But the Phantom Thieves have gained a lot of attention recently. We should be careful about who we trust with our freedom."

All eyes landed back on him. "I trust him, even if I don't really know *why."* Ryuji grinned at him while Morgana scowled at him. "I get what you're saying Morgana. And maybe we should be that way with everyone else. But Sanada literally risked his life to save Makoto. There's no way a *bad* person with ill-intentions would go to those lengths otherwise."

Ren then dropped his hand on Morgana's head and scratched at his ears. "You said so yourself months ago. He's a trustworthy guy. Even if he has personal problems we may never know about. I trust him."

Morgana sat back on his hind legs. "I can't say that much about his friends, though."

"And his friends would be…"

Ann looked over at him, so he assumed it would be best that he answer. "Ken Amada, the new teacher at the school." Both Ann and Ryuji's jaws dropped. "And another woman I'm not familiar with. Makoto said her name was Mitsuru, I think. But that's all I know, and that's assuming that's who she was referring to."

"Perhaps once she is well, we can ask Makoto for more information

on them." Yusuke popped another veggie fry into his mouth. "But I would assume that if Makoto knows them well, they would not be terrible people."

Ren pushed his chair back and stretched out his neck. "Let's call it a day. We should give her time to rest up first before we bombard her with questions." He spared a glance to his phone, pretended to check the time, but felt a stab to his heart when there was nothing from Makoto. "We'll talk more tomorrow."

Once Ren flopped onto his bed for the night, he gave another hard stare at his phone in his hand. Was Makoto unable to talk to him? While it was nice Sanada at least clued them in on her well-being, he wanted to know *what* had happened. He didn't bother with another message, worried that he was being too pushy and she needed her rest, but it was hard.

Would she have answered Ann had Ann been the one to check-in on her?

Would she have answered Ryuji, or Yusuke?

Why was Makoto always so distant around *him?*

To his complete surprise, he was able to get some decent sleep before he had to be up and ready for school. He carried about with his usual morning routine; cup of coffee, or two, curry breakfast, and a quick check of the weather and news updates.

For the most part, it looked like it was going to be a normal day.

As much as he didn't want to, Ren chose to take his time getting to school. He desperately wanted to see Makoto, just to make sure she was really okay, but his heart was a little heavier than it had usually been. He told himself he would check up on her during lunch, but it would only be a quick "how are you" and nothing more.

He was even half-tempted to ask Ann when he took his seat behind her for class. She said nothing to him, even if she stared at him a little longer than usual. Class continued on without interruption, for once, but he realized he was pressing down harder with his pencil

as he continued to jot down notes. He felt Morgana's tail slap against his thigh, but Ren didn't look down at him and tried to keep his mind focused on the task of paying attention.

When the lunch break came, Ann quickly turned around in her seat. "Did you hear anything from Makoto? Is she back?"

Ren ran a hand through his hair and pushed himself out of his seat. "I don't know, but I'll try and find out."

"I'm sure she's fine, Ren." Ann's voice had a lingering sadness. "It was probably nothing."

If it was nothing, Makoto would have spoken to him…

It was hard to try and ignore Morgana's pitiful attempts to make him feel better, but he at least was encouraging enough that Ren didn't stop in the middle of the stairwell and turn and walk back down to the first floor. If Makoto wasn't in the student council room, he would have no idea where to look, but he wouldn't even try. Texting her clearly wouldn't help him, but he wouldn't waste his lunch break playing a game that she didn't want him to win.

But it was his lucky day. He didn't even need to knock on the student council door before Makoto stepped out into the hallway. She turned to walk down the hall away from him, but he also knew she didn't see him. He was relieved to know she was okay, if a little pale, but he figured it would be a good idea to ask. For the team, since they would be asking *him* .

But when he reached out to put a hand on her shoulder, there was a hoarse cry of pain from her. He immediately retracted his hand as she spun around to face him. Her eyes grew wide upon seeing him and his voice got stuck in the back of his throat.

She didn't look terribly sick, but he knew she was *hurt* . "Oh…um, h-hi, Ren."

A part of him was upset. She could speak to him *now* when he had spent the entire day worrying over her well-being? But he reminded himself that she was *hurt* and her life didn't *revolve* around him. "I'm

glad to see you're back to school."

Her eyes fell to the floor, so he took that as the cue he needed to end the conversation. He bowed lightly to her and grabbed the strap of his bag tightly in his hand. "Take care."

He took three steps away from her before she ran up in front of him. He was honestly surprised she could move that fast with an injury, but he also didn't feel up for talking. "I'm going to be okay."

Ren tried to sound neutral. "You could have told me that yesterday."

He was impressed that she actually held his eyes rather than look away again. "It's hard for me to move my arm," she said, her left hand reaching over to her other shoulder. He noticed her wince at the contact. "I was clumsy, but the doctor said it will heal. By the time I saw your message, it was late and I…I assumed the damage had already been done."

"Yeah, because Sanada was nice enough to tell us you were okay after Ryuji asked him."

She finally dropped her head. "I didn't mean to worry you."

"No, it's fine." His hands dove into his pockets. "I worry too much."

Morgana was kind enough to sense the tense silence and pop out from Ren's bag. "I'm glad you're okay, Makoto. We can catch you up on everything you missed the past few days! Hasn't been too much anyway!"

Makoto gave them a subtle bow of her head. "I'm sorry for causing you both so much trouble."

It was very hard to try and keep ignoring her when she sounded so apologetic. But she looked back up at him with an adorable glint in her eyes and he knew that whatever she would ask of him, he would do. In a heartbeat.

"Um, I don't mean to ask this of you given what I've missed, but, could the two of us…maybe, meet up right after school?

Ren felt his heart skip a beat, if just one, but one was enough for him grin at her. “Offering to take me out on a date now?”

Oh, he missed her blush more than he ever thought he could. “Um… well, no…I-I don’t think so…”

His heart skipped another beat. “I’ll agree to talk if I can buy you a drink or a lunch or something.”

Her face darkened, but to his delight, a small smile formed on her face. Ren was pretty sure he was blushing, too. “Um, okay.”

Odd how ten minutes ago he told himself this would not happen and he needed to give up and move on. Why was he so stupid sometimes? “Perfect. I’ll pick you up at the gates then?”

Her hand moved to cover her face, but Ren’s chest puffed with a feeling he never thought he would have again. “D-Don’t say things like that.”

“I’ll let you get back to your lunch break.” Was it him, or was Makoto acting much less reserved now? He should probably avoid asking how she got hurt in case that triggered another relapse. “I’m happy to know you’re better, Makoto.”

“Th-Thank you, Ren.”

After a few seconds of awkward standing, Makoto walked past him back in the direction she had been heading before he stopped her. Ren took another second to find his breath, realize that yes, everything had actually happened and it wasn’t his imagination, then he was able to take his first step.

Morgana cheered by his ear. “See Ren? Everything is okay now!” He felt Morgana lower himself into his bag as he reached the end of the hallway. “And you even got yourself a date! Don’t screw it up now!”

“You have yourself a date, huh?”

In an instant, Ren felt the color drain from his face. Morgana pushed his head against his back in an effort to keep him calm, but it was

too late for that.

Kawakami-sensei rolled her eyes while Amada continued to give him a curious look. “It must be nice to be young and carefree all the time.”

Amada scanned the nearby area before locking eyes with him. “Who were you talking to?”

Did he seriously *hear* Morgana? He had to. Morgana was the one who mentioned the ‘date’. Kawakami-sensei didn’t seem nearly as interested as she huffed out a sigh and reminded him that the lunch break was almost over.

Thankfully, the tension didn’t last too long as Amada shrugged his shoulders and held up a Styrofoam cup. “Well, good luck to you.”

Both teachers went their respective ways, but Ren was frozen in his spot. “Is the coast clear?” he heard Morgana whisper after several more minutes passed. Ren didn’t answer him as he bolted down the stairs and into the classroom. Ann turned from her conversation with a few other girls in their class to eye him curiously.

“Is Makoto okay?”

He nodded to give her an answer, but when Morgana was safely inside his desk, Ren lowered his voice. “He understood you. What does this mean?”

Ann leaned her arm onto his desk with a confused scowl on her face. “Someone understood Morgana?”

“That teacher.” Ren suddenly felt like Morgana had been right in being mindful of those other persona users, if they really were persona users. “Amada. He heard Morgana’s voice. That means he’s been in the Metaverse, right?”

Did that mean the others had as well? How did they have access to the Metaverse *unless* they knew the person that Kaneshiro and Madarame had mentioned? According to them, no one else had the ability to make the travel. But…he didn’t want to believe that, since they all seemed to be nice people.

The only other reason wasn't one he wanted to think about, but since it popped up in his head, he felt an unsettling feeling clamp around his heart.

Amada knew Sanada, who knew the other woman, who all seemed to know *Makoto* .

Had that been where she got hurt?

Had that been why she was so *distant?*

Was she going behind their back to introduce a dangerous world to people who may or may not have been equipped to fight in it?

He leaned back in his chair, trying to tell himself there was no way Makoto willingly led them to the Metaverse. Maybe Amada had been at the station when they entered Mementos? No, Morgana would have noticed. They also hadn't been to Mementos in a few days. Maybe one of the other two had discovered it somehow and they all went together?

He knew one thing, and that was that he was going to get a straight answer from Makoto after school.

Chapter 64

Chapter 64

A *date?*

No. It wasn't a date. It was a *meeting* between her and a teammate that was nice enough to forgive her *lies* and bring her up to speed. Makoto had no idea what was going on with Medjed, who *Alibaba* was or what they wanted, or if the rest of the team had been as upset with her as Ren had been.

The only thing she *knew* was that her dad was okay, supposedly, her dad's friends were postponing another trip to Sae's palace to strategize (and make sure her dad was *really* okay), and that she didn't know how much longer she could keep up the charade with Ren and the others.

The biggest rule (according to her) of the Phantom Thieves was that they all agreed to change a heart *together* . And she had taken it upon herself to bypass that because Sae was her *sister.*

How many of the others had family or close friends that could have been dealt with in Mementos or had palaces? Why was *she* the one that had the right to take her powers and do whatever she wanted? She was fairly sure Ren and the rest of them would have understood, possibly even offered to help, but she couldn't ask it of them. No, she *didn't* ask it of them…

Maybe this was how her dad felt, drowning in one lie after another until he realized there was no way out. Maybe she could talk to her dad about it, or her mom, so she could finally tell her friends the *truth.*

Her parents weren't *dead* .

Her *sister* needed help.

She was tired of shouldering every single doubt and fear and

thought maybe it wouldn't be such a bad idea to have someone else help carry the load.

The last bell rang and she quickly shoved her books and her notes into her bag. She held her phone on top of her desk, hoping that Ren would say something along the lines of, *"Change of plans. Can't make it today,"* or, *"I'll be waiting for you :)!"*

But once a few minutes passed and she was one of the only students in the classroom, Makoto decided it wouldn't be polite to keep Ren waiting. She carefully pushed herself out from her desk and stepped out into the hall. She had to force herself to take a deep breath before she made it to the top of the stairs.

"Niijima-san!"

The voice wasn't as familiar as she thought it would be, but that meant it wasn't the principal, so that was a good thing. She was a little surprised when she saw Ken walking up to her, but she knew what he was going to ask before he asked her based off the expression he wore.

"You doing okay?"

She clasped her hands together in front of her and tried to remember that none of the students knew they were more than acquaintances. "Oh, yes, thank you."

Ken did a fine job on his end, too. "I heard you were out yesterday, which means the end of the world is upon us!"

Makoto could feel her lips curving into smile. "I-I doubt that…"

"Well," he added with a wave of his hand. "It's good to know you're okay. If you need anything, you can let me know."

His voice was more hushed at the end, but she nodded and he turned to talk to a few other students he seemed to know. Knowing she was already running a few minutes behind, she needed to head down to the gates before Ren got the wrong idea and he finally gave up on her.

She didn't have a lot of friends, so the ones she had she would like to keep.

Thankfully, no one else stopped to speak to her. But when she caught sight of Ren, something poked in her chest. He held his phone in his hand, leaned up against the outer wall, but there was a serious scowl on his face.

Had someone said something to him after lunch? Or was he still upset with her for getting hurt, even though she knew he didn't know *how* .

It took more guts than she thought to approach him. "Um, Ren?"

The scowl didn't go away and he lifted his eyes to acknowledge her. The next second, she knew he was mad at her. "Let's go for a walk."

What had happened that made him so angry? Ren wasn't even that angry of a person, at least, she never saw him angry often. But while she told herself that he didn't know what she was doing behind his back, he didn't know about her lies, a part of her worried that he *knew* .

Her heart suddenly couldn't take it. "Are you mad at me?"

Her words brought Ren to a halt a few blocks away from school. He drew his shoulders back with his breath and Makoto bit her lip in anticipation. "If I ask you something, will you be honest with me? I don't care what your answer is, but…" He turned to face her and his eyes bore holes into her soul. "I want you to tell me the truth."

She could tell by the way he held himself what he was going to ask. Did word get around that she had been hurt outside of the courthouse and Ren assumed that she went to the Metaverse? If that was the case, did he know she didn't go alone?

Something cold landed in the pit of her stomach. "Um, sure?"

Ren opened his mouth to ask the question, but he was rudely interrupted by two other individuals. "Makoto Niijima."

They both turned to the arrivals, but Makoto's heart jumped into her

throat. They were both dressed nicely, business-formal even, but she saw the *badges* and knew who they were. She could have sworn she recognized the voice as the one that called out to her dad when her mom had taken off to the police station yesterday.

“C-Can I help you?”

They both seemed polite, but she remembered the way her dad looked at her after the one had called out to him. But, what did that mean? Was he in trouble again? And if so, why would these men come speak to her?

“We’d like a moment of your time, if that’s acceptable.”

Well, these men worked with her dad, so she doubted they meant any ill-will. Any questions she felt uncomfortable with, she could probably tell them that. Hopefully. Unless…

Unless they were there to speak to her about why she was at the courthouse…

“She doesn’t have to speak to you.”

Ren’s voice made her jump in her place, even if it was more timid than it had been when he was addressing her. However, Makoto noticed that both men’s eyes narrowed when he spoke.

“And who might you be?”

Knowing Ren had a criminal status (but still unsure of *what* had happened), Makoto put a hand on his arm. “It’s okay, Ren. I don’t mind.” She then faced the two cops. “What can I do for you?”

Makoto’s heart picked up its pace when the men stood on different sides of her. One put a hand on her uninjured shoulder. There was something off in his tone, but she couldn’t place it. “Let’s go talk more privately.”

She suddenly regretted not saying *no* earlier. However, Ren still came to her defense. “We have reservations in a few minutes.” She felt his hand on her wrist. “Whatever you want to say, you can ask her here and please do it quickly.”

He sounded more like Joker than Ren, but Makoto didn't know if that made her more anxious or relieved. "R-Right."

The hand on her shoulder pushed against her more forcefully. The cop on her other side was the one who spoke. "We just have some questions regarding a friend of yours."

Makoto went through her mental list of friends. If they wanted to speak about Ren, they would have known who he was. She didn't really hang out much with Ryuji, who was a known troublemaker. Ken? Was Ken in trouble and the cops had somehow caught them together *once?*

"You're close with an Akihiko Sanada, are you not?"

Did this mean her dad was in trouble again? Or were these cops not really the people she should be associating with?

She took a step closer to Ren, suddenly worried about who these men were. "Um, do I know you?"

Ren must have sensed her hesitation and finally stepped between her and one of the cops. "We're going to be late." He grabbed her wrist again. "Let's go."

But the cop with his hand on her shoulder dropped his hand to her other wrist. "Now, now, don't be rude. I would hate to have to speak to you after I put you in handcuffs for evading police questioning."

Makoto's heart fell into her stomach. She thought she was going to be sick. Ren released her arm in his own surprise, but she didn't want him to get in trouble because of her. As hard as it was to do, she turned to him and bowed her head.

"I'll be okay. I-I'm sorry."

To her horror, Ren said nothing to her and turned sharply to walk back towards the school. She told herself that he wouldn't just *leave* her with two strangers that threatened her, but at the same time, she needed him to stay, and he didn't.

Maybe it was a proper punishment for lying for so long.

“Let’s go, Niijima.”

They rounded a corner and both men stopped halfway down a small alley. The only comfort she had was that they both stood together and left her exit path clear behind her. Whether or not that was a show of good faith or them testing her, she didn’t want to ask.

But they just *stood* there. Watching her. Making her feel *small* . Why? And why did they want to know about her dad? Should she ask first, or wait until they brought the issue up themselves. They didn’t seem to be doing much other than looking her over and making their own judgements…

“Um, so…w-what do you want?” She tried to sound strong and brave, but she was pretty sure she failed *miserably* .

One of the cops smirked at her. “You sound nervous.”

Her back straightened slightly at the implied insult. “It’s not every day a cop wants to speak to me.”

The other grinned at her, too. “Are you sure about that?”

“Sanada seems to have taken a liking to you.”

Oh god. Was this another *are you two dating* conversation? The looks on their faces sure seemed to tell her as much. *Keep your head up.* “I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

Both men laughed. “Don’t play coy with us, girl. We know you’re his weakness.”

This was their test. Her first instinct was to turn around and run back to the school and hole herself up in the student council room. But if she did that, they could take her retreat as an unintentional answer and attack her dad. She wouldn’t allow that.

“I don’t understand what you’re talking about.” If she was so good at lying to her *friends,* why couldn’t she lie to a *stranger?* “I haven’t been in contact with Sanada for weeks.”

“And why is that?” There was a mocking tone to the one’s voice. “He

took you to that club and you prefer things between the two of you to stay private?"

Now she was getting angry. "I would like to believe when a teenager gets kidnapped, a *cop* would respond accordingly."

It was hard to not cower under a pair of narrowing eyes. "You have a sharp tongue, don't you?"

Calm down . "I mean no offense." She involuntarily took a step back. They both took a matching step forward. "I have a boyfriend. *My age.* " There it was. Her *lie* . "And he was the one who spoke to Sanada about my disappearance. He wouldn't have been at that club otherwise."

Makoto took a second to *think* . Now that words were in the air that were not *true* , she needed to plan the rest of her strategy. While using Ren as a scapegoat was wonderful for the moment, Ren wasn't there. What if they asked him for verification? Did they know she was referring to him, or could she get away with them never knowing?

"That young man from earlier, eh?"

Or not.

"Does he know Sanada, too?"

The question came flying off her tongue before she knew it. "Why are you asking about Sanada?"

Both men looked at each other, then faced her with sorrowful expressions. "We believe he's engaging in criminal activities behind the public's back."

Makoto knew instantly that wasn't true, but if she said as much, what would they think of her? She claimed not to know him well at all, so how would she know what he was doing beyond the events of Kamoshida and Kaneshiro?

"Oh." She did her best to act natural. "I heard he was a great cop. Are we thinking about different people, perhaps?"

She wondered if someone would give her a medal for her fantastic critical thinking and acting. She felt she deserved it. However, her pride quickly fell victim to her fear once one of the cops reached out and pulled on her wrist painfully.

“You think you’re clever, don’t you?” Her back hit the wall and she was suddenly *terrified* . She should have ran when she had the chance. “I wonder what would happen if Sanada found your body in this alleyway after a *criminal* had their way with you.”

The threat alone was enough to put her mind in defense mode. The palm of her hand smashed into his nose and he stepped away immediately. But, he was smart. A cop was *trained* , knew how to maneuver around a situation like this, so he promptly threw her against the wall when she tried to step around him. The impact of her chest smacking into it left her winded, until her injured arm was twisted behind her back. She couldn’t bite back the cry of pain as she felt the bandages tear across her flesh. She could only hope the stitches didn’t go with them.

“You like to play rough, huh?” His breath was hot on her ear. She tried to fight against him as best she could with the searing pain in her shoulder, but he ended her struggle when he pushed himself into her completely. “If you die here, no one will know what happened. So depending on your answer, I’ll make it quick. Are you Sanada’s daughter or not? Yes or no.”

She yelped in pain when he pulled at the back of her hair. Why wasn’t anyone coming to help her? Why did Ren abandon her? What had her dad done to piss these people off to the point they wanted to *kill* her? How could they go from questioning her about her *relationship* with him to if he was her *dad* or not? Had she done something to give that away?

Against her will, tears formed at the corner of her eyes. “I-I already told you…”

He pulled on her hair harder, her shoulder burning painfully. “This is your last warning.”

Makoto had a feeling that if she could pause time, go ask her dad if

she could tell these guys the truth, he would tell her to do so. But life didn't work like that. And how did she know that if she did tell them that she was his daughter, that they wouldn't kill her anyway? Why would *cops kill?*

"H-He…He's…"

"What's going on here?"

Through her blurry vision, Makoto couldn't see much, but she knew the voice belonged to. "How interesting to see you, Sanada."

She worried for a moment that her dad was going to murder the one pinning her to the wall, but he spoke with a surprisingly calm tone. "I heard that you broke up a special day for a good kid. He was pretty upset when I saw him at the station heading home. I figured I'd come see what the holdup was."

Makoto was released the next second, but it took her another minute or two to realize it. When she was able to take one step, she quickly came to stand in front of her dad, trying not to show him how *scared* she had been. She failed to find her voice when she noticed the calm, but raging aura he exuded. She resumed her acting role and bowed to him once.

"Um, I apologize for the trouble." *Don't cry.* "I should know better than to talk back to a cop. I deserved it."

He sighed heavily, but nodded at her statement. "Get going. I think someone is waiting for you."

He didn't need to tell her twice. Regardless of if Ren was really waiting for her around the corner or down the street, she didn't care. She had to get away from those men. A part of her wanted to take her dad with her, so she knew *he* didn't kill them, but she knew he wouldn't. Hopefully. She would find out later that night if he didn't come home…

"Makoto?"

She was much too frazzled to keep herself from yelling out in surprise. Ren came up to her from her side, but she had half the

mind to notice his eyes fall to her shoulder. “You’re bleeding.”

She was a lot of things she was sure Ren could see. Her shoulder burned and she could feel a small amount of blood seeping through her shirt now that he brought it up. She was crying, not from pain as much as from her fear and the fact two *policemen* would have *killed* her. She was shaking because she was cold, even though it was hot and humid.

Why did Ren always have to see her like this?

Oh. Right. Because she was a *liar* .

She lifted her other arm to wipe a sleeve over her face. “I’m okay.”

Ren didn’t stop moving towards her until he was standing on her right side. “They did this to you?”

Makoto shook her head. “N-No…This happened…the other day…”

“They did this to you.” His tone was darker this time around. “You weren’t bleeding when you walked away with them.”

She couldn’t lie to him again. “Well, they just…agitated it, I guess.”

She heard his sigh, but she didn’t know how to interpret it. “There’s no need to *downplay* their actions.” Had her dad noticed the blood, too? “Do you want me to take you to the doctor?”

“I-I’m sorry…”

There was a faint trace of a smile on his face, or her mind was playing tricks on her. It *had* been a hell of an afternoon. “It’s not your fault.” He walked around to her other side and she felt him place his hand over hers. “Is this okay?”

She nodded, her words stuck in the back of her throat. She had no idea where he was leading her, where her dad had come from, what Ren had originally wanted to talk about before the cops had shown up.

“Did…Did you tell my…Um,” she paused to try and correct her

almost slip up. Would it be okay to tell Ren the truth? “Did you tell Sanada where I was?”

Ren eyed her curiously for a second, but then he shrugged his shoulders lightly. “I worried about what was happening, so I asked Ryuji for his number and asked Morgana to follow behind you.” A light sigh escaped his lips. “I’m glad I did. I just didn’t know what else to do to help.”

Makoto felt her grip tightening on Ren’s hand. The harder she squeezed, the more genuine his smile became. “T-Thank you…” The silence took over for a minute or two, but several minutes of walking without a conversation began to grow on her heart. “Um, c-can I ask you something?”

“Let’s get you looked at first, okay?” When her grip weakened at the softness of his tone, he was the one to tighten his grip. “You’re not bleeding a lot, but enough. The only doctor I know is close to where I live and I don’t want to take you all the way out there.” He paused, then turned to her with a familiar life in his eyes. “But if you allowed me to, I could take care of your dinner. Get that ‘date’ you owe me.”

Despite her initial reaction to blush, she could feel the tears streaming down her face. Ren dropped her hand immediately, coming to stand directly in front of her, placing both of his hands on her forearms.

“I-I’m sorry, Makoto. I know you’ve been through hell today. I shouldn’t act like this.”

“Why?”

He must have caught her voice cracking because he was oddly still the next second. “What?”

“Why are you like this to me? After everything I’ve done to you. After everything I hide from you. After everything I’ve *lied* to you about… *Why?”*

He was quiet, as if contemplating her words, or thinking about what to say to her. She hoped that he would tell her it was just who he

was as a person, someone who cared about *everyone* , but another part of her desperately wanted him to walk away. She didn't deserve his kindness. The quicker he told her that, the quicker she could understand and *move on* .

When there was a light laugh from him, Makoto didn't know how to react. "You're cute, you know that?"

That caught her off guard. "W-What?"

"Maybe you worry just as much as I do." He ran a hand through his unruly hair. It looked extra messy today. "But when I first met you, I could sense it. You want to be independent. *You* want to help others. *You* have to shoulder every burden at that school. I felt like you've always been dependable, but no one was dependable when you needed someone to be, or they had let you down."

His hand locked with hers again. "I saw myself in you, if I'm being honest. Too scared to tell anyone about my problems because they would think less of me. But I wanted to help every single person I could. Sometimes I tried, but it blew up in my face. Like…well…" The grip on her hand weakened. "You're not the only one who has problems speaking about their personal life."

It had been the first time since she met him that she wanted to help him. Even if she had no idea what she was helping him with. "I-I know I have no right to say this…but…y-you can talk to m-me…"

Why the hell did she say that? She *had* no right. She didn't say anything to him about Sis or the other group of persona users she led into the Metaverse the other night. She *lied* to him about her parents. Why was it okay for her to tell him she would listen to him when he had tried to tell her the same but she chose *not* to?

"Maybe once we get you fixed up, I can talk about it." At least the charming smirk was back on his face. It was charming…a little. "And we can get to know each other a little more."

She nodded slowly, deciding now that he was more charismatic, it would be a good time to bring up her other predicament. "Um, I-I also might have told those cops you…you were m-my…um,

boyfriend."

Her heating face dried the dying trail of tears, but Ren's eyes widened with a sparkle so bright, she couldn't look into his eyes. "You did *what?"*

It was suddenly too hot for her outside. "Uh…I-I didn't mean to. I-I'm so sorry." Then the spicket opened and she couldn't stop the flow of words. "I told them that I had a boyfriend so they didn't think that Sanada took me into that club and you called him that day to come help get me and they kind of made the connection on their own I'm really sorry."

He was quiet again, but when she looked over at him, her face burned *again* . He was biting back a laugh, but his eyes still had that glow to them. When he released his breath, he chuckled at her, but it wasn't insulting, or meant to chide her. She didn't know him well enough to fully believe it, but she could have sworn it was a *tickled* laugh. His laugh was cute, too.

But Ren made a move for her hand again, lacing his fingers through hers, sending a jolt of panic through her skin. Was it panic? She didn't know anymore. "Well then, I guess I should get my *girlfriend* all cleaned up before our first *real* date then, huh?"

Makoto toppled over and smacked her head on his shoulder. "G-G-*Girlfriend?"*

If she got any warmer, she was going to roast alive. "What? You're breaking up with me already?"

She wisely chose to keep her mouth shut.

Chapter 65

Chapter 65

“Is she better?”

Ren held his breath while Takemi gave him a hard stare. She was messing with him, he could tell, she was *that* kind of person, but then she chuckled and the air left his lungs in one mad rush.

“Some of the stitches tore open, and I’m assuming she’s in a bit of pain, but she told me she had medication at home.” Then her eyes narrowed at him and Ren’s back straightened instantly. “How did she get that kind of laceration?”

“Um.” He felt like a small child being scolded by his parents for stealing a cookie in the middle of the night when they said not to a million times. (He *never* did that…) “I have no idea.”

“Hm,” Takemi snorted at him. “Some boyfriend material you’ll ever be.”

Intentional or not, her words cut him straight to the heart. He had no idea how Makoto had gotten hurt, but it had been bad enough that she had to take a day off school to rest. Or had it been on her way to school? Had those cops gotten to her before? Did those cops send someone after her? Had her life been threatened and that was why she was so distant? To protect him and their friends?

Or was he overthinking this, like he overthought everything else?

“Sorry,” was all he was able to say. Takemi ignored him and walked back behind the check-in counter to take her seat.

“She should be out as soon as she’s done changing, but I recommend you find her a shirt to wear or people are going to talk.”

Right. Ren doubted Makoto would feel comfortable wearing one of *his* shirts, but…maybe he could tell her that it was a normal

boyfriend/girlfriend thing to do? Was it? He didn't even know. He would have to look it up.

Not that he thought Makoto was *serious* about being his girlfriend, but he also wasn't personally ready. He had a lot to say to her. She had a lot to say to him. He would like to have those defenses down a little bit before he threw himself into a relationship.

Plus, ego wounding at the thought, he didn't know *how* to be a good boyfriend. What did they do besides be a friend? An ear to listen to? Everything he couldn't do right *now* . How the hell was he going to be any good?

He really needed to have a talk with Makoto. He could tell she had been more interested in his past when he almost told her about his record, which was a good thing. It meant that she would likely be more willing to be open with him.

But where he worried was with her honesty. She even admitted to *lying* to him. About what? He would never have thought she would have been a *good* liar, but he couldn't pinpoint which of her statements had been false.

Ren lifted his head when the door opened and Makoto stepped out into the lobby. Her eyes never met his. Her head was lowered enough that he couldn't make out her expression fully. Her arm was cradled against her stomach to serve as support. Did the time alone make her think and now she was regretting saying anything to him at all?

He shook the thought out of his head. They *needed* to talk. About Medjed. About Alibaba. About *her* .

"You hungry?"

His heart warmed a degree when she looked up at him. "Hm? O-Oh." The light dusting of pink on her cheeks made his heart flutter. "I-I…uh, I could eat…I guess…"

All previous doubts and concerns were washed away as he extended a hand to grasp her free one. "I know a place that makes

excellent curry. The best. Ten out of five stars."

Her muffled laugh almost made him squeal in delight. "That sounds good."

It was *so* nice to hear her voice rather than a simple nod or shake of the head. Ren silently thanked Takemi as he held the door open for Makoto, then followed her out into the street. She never let go of his hand. He was pretty sure his face was warm now, too.

"Follow me." He led Makoto down the streets of Yongen-Jaya, pointing out a few other things they passed. The market Sojiro made him go to when he was low on supplies. The batting cages, to which he could have sworn he saw some amount of excitement on her face. He stopped in front of Leblanc, grabbed the door handle, then offered her one of his many charming grins. (They were usually reserved for her anyway.)

"After you, my Queen."

Ah, that blush was going to send him into cardiac arrest one day. He would die happy.

But once they were inside, there was a slight change to Makoto. Ren could tell she was retreating into herself, since the last time (and only time until now) that she had been there, Sojiro seemed to make her somewhat uncomfortable. He may have forgotten about that until just now.

However, Sojiro approached them from behind the bar with a smirk forming on his face. "Well, what is this? A date?"

Ren ushered Makoto into the first booth he could. He noticed that her eyes dropped to the table, her hands held each other with nervous strength, and he suddenly regretted bringing her here. "I'm sorry. I didn't think about this before I asked you over."

Makoto shook her head softly. "N-No. I-I'm okay…S-Sorry."

"Let me get you some food, and then maybe you can judge my batting abilities."

A small smile worked its way to her face. “O-Okay…”

Ren tried not to fist pump the air, so he fell back on his feet so he could turn to speak to Sojiro. “Can I have two plates of curry, please?”

Sojiro crossed his arms, but that grin was still showing. “Treating a girl to a good dinner?”

“Well,” he said as he stepped closer to the bar. “I did rate your curry ten out of five stars.”

The older man cackled. “Fine, fine. I won’t be the one to spoil your ‘date’.”

A few minutes later, there were two plates of curry and rice on the table before him. Ren had to be the first to initiate the ‘it’s okay to eat’ process, but once Makoto lifted her spoon, he watched her carefully. Tried to, without being too creepy. She struggled for the most part, her left hand clearly not her dominant hand. It broke his heart, but he didn’t know how to help her without feeding her himself. Which he would *not* do. She had her pride, and he knew better than to insult it.

Makoto was able to get comfortable halfway through the meal, but Ren also noted that she was much more relaxed now than he had ever seen her recently. He hoped some of that was because he was there with her, mixed in with the fact she was eating something that really was as good as he had said.

“It’s good, isn’t it?” He never liked chats over dinner, but it was a simple question.

And like he had hoped, she nodded. “It’s wonderful.”

The choirs of voices cheered him in his head. Everything was going so well. She was eating. She was *speaking* . She looked well. He *felt* well.

How that would last…well, he would try not to push his luck.

When both plates had been cleared, Makoto bowed her head over

to where Sojiro was watching them. “Um, t-thank you for the meal. I-It was wonderful.”

Ren turned his head to study Sojiro’s reaction. But the barista kindly smiled through the smoke of his cigarette. “I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

Makoto came to face him again, her head lowering at Sojiro’s words. “Um, thank you, too, Ren. For bringing me by.”

He reached over the table to grab her plate, then pushed himself out of the booth. “Time to go wear off some calories, right?”

Something flashed in Makoto’s eyes, but she looked away from him before he could place it. He didn’t ask her, choosing to head to the kitchen sink to start his task of cleaning their dishes. He felt an odd weight on his shoulder, turning to find Sojiro chuckling behind him.

“You’re gonna ditch your girl on your date?” He not-so-gently pushed him out of the way. “Go. I know how to do the damn dishes.”

Ren’s heart swelled as he nodded his head and walked back to the booth Makoto was sitting at. She glanced up at him, then he offered his hand to her. “I know it’s getting kind of late, but I really want to show you how good I am at hitting home runs since the idea is in my head now.”

Makoto chuckled at him and came to her feet as well. “I’ve been to a batting cage once, a long time ago, and I had a lot of fun.”

She was opening up to him and it took the breath out of him. It was hard to speak. “Well, I fully expect you to judge and then utterly get destroyed when you’re able to challenge me.”

While Makoto didn’t respond to his over the top statement, he caught the slight roll of her eyes. But when she turned to head for the door, he caught the small stain of blood on her shoulder. He quickly reached out and grabbed her hand to stop her.

“Wait.” He told himself that Makoto needed a new shirt, or a jacket, or *something,* so he should provide it. It didn’t *mean* anything, even though he was certain she was going to be adorable in his clothes. Was that too much to daydream about? Did girls like wearing their

boyfriend's clothes?

"I have a shirt you can wear over yours so no one freaks out about the blood on your shirt."

He worried he slurred his words too quickly for her to understand them, but a short moment later, Makoto fell back against the booth. "Y-You…want me to…t-to wear your…your shirt?"

He could feel the blush spreading over his neck and onto his face. "Um, well, you don't have to, but I figured it would help cover it up?"

Then came the awkward silence. He couldn't meet her eyes. She couldn't meet his. Had that been too much? Should he have just kept quiet? It wasn't a tremendous amount of blood; enough to bring to someone's attention, but still…

"I, uh…" He didn't know how he was able to hear Makoto's voice, as soft as it had been, over the drumming of his own heart in his ears. "T-Thank you…"

Had he misunderstood? Did she want to wear his shirt? Or was that a polite decline? Why was this so *hard?* "Do you want me to go get one?"

It was the first time he found her slow nod an acceptable answer, because he was far too nervous to *hear* a response. But he sure as hell *saw* it. And it was hard to maintain the grin that dared to split his face in half.

"I'll go get one, then."

He bolted up the stairs at a rate of speed that Ryuji would have gaped at. Morgana, who had returned home a while ago presumably, sat up on his bed at the noise. "Where have you been?"

Ren threw him a cheeky grin while his hands pulled one shirt out of his makeshift dresser, then another, and another, until he finally found one that he felt would suit the girl who had his heart. "I'm taking Makoto to the batting cages."

Morgana stood up on all four legs and his eyes shimmered. "Is she

okay?"

"I hope more than okay." Ren held onto the shirt tightly in his hand like it was the most precious thing to him. "She's kind of talking to me again. Maybe I can get her to open up to me so we can do something to help her this time around."

Morgana's tail wagged happily behind him. "Good for you, Ren. Just be careful."

He offered a simple nod before he found himself back down in the café proper. Makoto's eyes immediately fell to the shirt he held out to her. His heart stopped for a brief second when she didn't take it out of his hand. Did she not like the color? Did he misinterpret her nod? Was this *not* what she had been thinking about?

"T-Thank you…Ren."

His name coming off her tongue made his heart do several flips in his chest. "It may be a little big on you, but I think you'll look really cute."

She turned away, embarrassed, but she finally grabbed the shirt from his hands. He had been smart enough to pick out a button up shirt, something he was mentally thankful for thinking about as he crossed over in front of her to help her put it on. The sleeves stopped below her elbows. The bottom of the shirt reached halfway down her thighs. And it was hard, *so hard* , not to reach out and hug her and squeeze her because she was *so cute!*

"It looks great on you!"

Makoto shook her head adamantly while he laughed at her. Once she was calm again, he reached out and took her hand in his. "You ready?"

The walk to the rooftop cages, while relatively short, was done in silence. Ren worried Makoto was thinking too much, or a little bit, but enough to make *him* worried that she needed him to speak. Was that something a good 'boyfriend' did? Take the lead in the conversation? What should he bring up? Her life? His life? Or should

he be quiet because if he *did* say something she might never speak again?

Was there a book in the library somewhere that he could have all of these questions answered?

He reached for his wallet to pay for the fee when the elderly man caught sight of Makoto standing behind him. “Is she going to play?”

Ren knew he should say no because she was *hurt* , but he felt so much better when she came to stand next to him and told the man herself. “Maybe next time?”

Was she implying she wanted to hang out with him *again?* His heart nearly exploded in his chest. “Y-Yeah, next time.” He cleared his throat, feeling his face becoming warm, then slid the money through the window. Did he just stutter in front of her? Was that inappropriate?

“Let’s see how well you do.”

Right. They were at the batting cages. He had to hit a lot of home runs to impress her or she may *not* want to come back again. His lips stretched into a mad grin while he wrapped his fingers around the bat he usually liked to go with.

“Wanna make a bet?”

Makoto took a seat on a bench outside the cage of his choosing, but said nothing to him. He opted to finish his thought. “If I can hit all the balls that come at me, I get to take you out sometime next week. Deal?”

She at least appeared to mull over his words. But as soon as she gave him a curt nod, his fingers tightened around his bat. “And if you miss one?”

Ren lifted the bat, elbows up, and swung at an imaginary ball. “I won’t miss.”

Makoto said nothing more, so he took his stance on the right side of the plate. *Hands up, elbows up, eyes on the ball.* The first pitch came, and thanks to his neat little study trick he recently learned, the ball connected with the lower center of his bat and a metal *ping* filled the air. It was soon followed by a loud *thud* from the ball meeting its mark on the target board.

This may be too easy.

He took half a second to toss Makoto a quick, satisfied smirk before he repeated his stance. The second result was the same, just a tad bit slower on his swing. The ball missed the target by a few centimeters, but he *hit* it.

The third and fourth pitch came quickly and easily enough, both of the balls going straight where he envisioned them going.

The fifth he wasn't ready for.

Being a slightly more confident person with Makoto hanging out with him and his perfect streak while she was watching, he took half a second to focus his third eye on *her* . He briefly thought he was invading her privacy for a moment, but then he saw a swirling of energy that he had never seen before. Not that he had a manual to refer to about *what* he was seeing, but she was definitely… *everything* .

She was content on the outside, but she was upset, hurt, lonely, miserable, worried, and so much more. His half a second lasted long enough that he heard the machine fire the ball from behind the net, but he was nowhere near ready to hit it.

He was lucky he was able to play it off as a simple swing and a miss before he stood like a fool and watched a ball go by on his final shot.

There was mild laughter behind him and he looked over at Makoto as she was coming to her feet. "You missed one."

But Ren was overwhelmed. How could she act so *happy* when she was everything but? He wanted her to talk to him, even if it was hard for her to do. He would be there for her. He would support her. He

didn't even care about whatever she lied to him about so long as she *told* him what was going on. He was sure whatever her reasons, they were justifiable. She had a good heart.

"Ren?"

"Oh." He shook himself out of his thoughts. However, his smile was more forced than he needed it to be. "Looks like I'm not very good when I know there's a cute girl watching me."

Makoto shot her gaze down to her hands in front of her. "S-Stop that…"

Ren stepped out of the cage while he gave Makoto enough time to collect herself. He returned the bat to its proper home before he came up behind her. She turned to him, but neither one of them said anything. It wasn't super late, but it was late enough that he should probably *not* have a heart to heart with her and head home. Even if he knew he wouldn't be able to sleep. Even if he knew he would be throwing a million ideas over in his head. Even if he knew he wanted to spend more time with her to keep her *happy* .

"Can I ask you something?"

Makoto tensed at his tone, so one of his hands ran through the back of his hair. He looked up at the sky, a glowing mix of reds and oranges, a sign that he really needed to *shut up* , but the longer he stood in silence, the harder it became to fight the voice telling him to save it.

"Are you afraid of me because I'm a criminal?"

Makoto reeled back at his question and a hand flew to her mouth. "W-What?"

The hand in his hair pulled at handfuls until it *hurt* . "I've been under the impression for so long that you don't like me because I have a record. And you're in a position at school that would make it hard for you to associate with a delinquent like me. And if that's why you don't tell me what's happening in your life, I get it. I probably wouldn't trust me either."

“I-I…I never said that.”

Ren chuckled to himself. It sounded pathetic. Why was he ruining the moment? “But you don’t know what happened to me. I would have thought that by now you would have realized it was just a word to describe me rather than who I was…But…maybe that’s my fault, because I never told you.”

He couldn’t ask her to bare her soul to him if he wasn’t willing to do the same. He was the leader, right? As of now, *he* was the one who wanted to pursue a real relationship with her. Why would it be fair to make her talk to him first? He exhaled every ounce of air in his lungs as he fell back against the fencing of the cages.

“I can’t ask you to be forthcoming with me when I can’t do the same with you.” He took another slow inhale to steady his heart, but he knew Makoto was very much expecting him to continue. He just hoped it was all for the best.

“I was walking home late one night and I heard someone cry out for help.” He closed his eyes as that night came flooding back into his mind. “There was a woman trying to fight off a man who was trying to force her into a car. She made eye contact with me, begged me to help, so…so I did.”

He crossed his arms over his chest and his hands curled under his arms. “I grabbed him, but he was so drunk that he lost his balance and he hit the guardrail on the road. He looked back up at me and threatened me over a small cut to his face. I thought he was just pissed because he fell over, but he kept saying words to me…”

That weird ringing came back into his head, blocking out some of his memories. Weird, but he kept going. “The next thing I know, the cops are there asking what happened.” He braved making eye contact with Makoto. “The woman backed up that man’s story. Told the cops I assaulted him. And then I’m being thrown into a cop car and tossed into a jail cell without anyone bothering to listen to me.”

She was clearly shaken up by his story, but it touched his heart in the smallest of ways to know she was being strong enough to listen. Hell, he was pretty sure Ryuji and Ann had started screaming and/or

crying at this point.

“The judge sentenced me without even bothering to hear me out. My parents shipped me off without a word. People came out to the station just so they could tell me how disappointed they were of a neighborhood kid who turned out to be nothing but trouble.”

He leaned his head back to look at the sky again. It was beautiful. “I was hurt. I was angry. But I figured if anything, I would try and move around it. I had always wanted to visit Tokyo. I didn’t care for my peers I went to school with. My parents fought all the time. So maybe there was a glimmer of hope I could take away.

“But on my first day here, I got lost. I had a small run-in with Arsene before I knew what he was. Sojiro treated me like some kind of dog, and then I show up to meet the principal and I finally lost that shred of hope. Everyone hated me because of my status. Everyone judged me as a criminal without bothering to *know* me. Sojiro fucking *abandoned* me!”

Ren hated the fact that he had gotten angry enough that he swore around a girl (was that inappropriate behavior in a relationship?) and that he had talked down on a man who had slowly warmed up to him over the months. He forced in another breath, released it, then lowered his head to find Makoto’s eyes.

She was a lot stronger than he expected, and he was grateful. “But then I met you. I had my judgments about you at first, I’m not going to lie, but you didn’t cast me aside and walk away. In fact, you even went *out* of your way to help me. People back *home* would never have done that.”

Her reaction pulled a smile out of him and he took a few steps closer to where she sat and kneeled down in front of her. “I know you probably think what you did was small and insignificant, but to me, your actions and your kindness gave me back that hope I had lost. And when I knew Kamoshida was hurting you, I knew I had to do something to help you. But…”

He reached out for her hands clasped on her lap. He was proud of her efforts to keep her head up, keep her eyes dry, but he would

have wiped away her tears had she let them show. He could tell she was fighting *hard* . He wished she wouldn't. "I can't help you now. You walk away from me. You'd rather deal with your problems on your own. And I don't ever want you to think I don't admire your independence, but at the same time, I want to be there for you. You should never have to be alone."

There was one or two tears that came to her eyes, but they never fell. "But…but you're going to hate me."

"Makoto, nothing you say to me will ever make me hate you. *Ever* ." He tightened his hold on her hands. "I don't care if you tell me that you don't want to be more than friends. I don't care if you tell me you've been lying to me from the beginning. Because personally," he added with a chuckle. "I wouldn't believe it."

She tried to pull her hands out of his, but he was the stronger of the two. His other hand lifted to cradle her face as a few tears fell from her eyes. "I don't think I can tell you the truth without asking first."

He would wipe away her tears for the rest of his life if he could just see her smile again. "Then tell me when you're ready." She tried to shake him off, but he brought his other hand up to her face to stop her. "I don't want you to tell me everything right now. Let's take it one day at a time, okay?"

Makoto took a few minutes to compose herself, which he was more than willing to give her some space for. When her eyes had dried to a degree, she pushed herself up off the bench and met his eyes.

"Thank you, Ren, for being a better friend than I could ever be for you."

He smirked at her. "Don't say that. We'll get better together, right?"

"R-Right." Her blush might be his favorite thing to see. "I'm also sorry I judged you as a criminal when you were the only one who came to my aid with Kamoshida."

Ren put his hand on her shoulder when she made a move to bow to him. "You didn't know me well back then. It's okay." His hand moved

to lift her chin so he could look into those beautiful eyes. They reflected the dusk light above them. “I forgive you.”

His fingers began to get warm before she finally looked away from him. Ren decided to leave the conversation at that. It was late. She needed to get home. He needed to get home. He would save the question about Amada for a different day. After all, he had plenty to be happy about to have a wonderful and well-deserved sleep.

“Let me get you to the station,” he said, stretching out his back, then dropping his arm over her back. Was he being too clingy? Too much into her personal space? “I would be hurt if you didn’t get your sleep because of me.”

If Makoto was uncomfortable with the way he was holding her, she never said anything. He offered a wave to the attendant as he escorted Makoto down the stairs and back onto the streets. The air was sticky, it was likely going to rain tomorrow, but everything else was peaceful. He caught himself glancing down to Makoto more often than not, but every time he did, he was filled with happiness.

He would sacrifice anything to have a chance with her. With how he felt about her now, he would love to see how much he would grow in the months to come if she told him she wanted to stay by his side.

He was off in his own mind for long enough that he didn’t realize he had made it to the station until Makoto pulled out of his arm. “Thank you for walking me to the station.”

His hand scratched the back of his head. “Oh. You’re welcome.” It was suddenly hard to have to part ways with her. “Get home safe. And…sleep well.” What else was one supposed to say as a parting gesture?

Her smile, although small, made him much warmer inside. “You never told me what would happen if you missed one of those balls.”

Ren stared back at her in a daze, then realized he was staring in a daze, then broke out into a laugh that he could feel in his soul. “No. No I guess I didn’t, did I?”

Makoto approached him slowly (or maybe that was his imagination) and the humor left his body in one mad rush. She stopped when she was close enough that he could reach out and hold her (should he hug her goodbye?), but he waited to see what her move was going to be first.

“So can I ask you to help me? F-For not hitting…all of them…I-like you said…”

If he hugged her, would she mind? “Of course.”

Her head fell to her chest and his stomach twisted into a knot. But with a quick breath, she brought her eyes back up to meet his. There was a fire burning in them he hadn’t realized he would miss. “I want you to help me become the person I want to be. And to do that, I need to broaden my horizons. I’ve had my nose stuck in a book for too long without seeing the world around me. And I would like your help with that, if I can ask for it.”

Ren was sure his heart was going to burst with how much joy she had just filled it with. She had spoken so confidently, so passionately, almost like they had jumped into the Metaverse and he was speaking to Queen. It was a powerful change, and one that made him weak in the knees and dizzy in the head.

He had no idea how he managed to find his voice. “I would do this for you even if I would have hit every single one of them.”

He would do anything for the chance to see that blush, accompanied with that beautiful smile, for the rest of his life.

Chapter 66

Chapter 66

He didn't even know he was bleeding until he felt the pressure of a wrapping over his knuckles.

"Aki. What happened?"

Hell, Akihiko didn't even know he was *home* until just now. "Huh?"

Minako frowned at him and dropped her attention back to tending to his hands. "Please tell me you didn't kill someone…"

Oh. Did he? Was that why his hands hurt so much? No. He knew better. But why couldn't he *remember?*

"I've been trying to speak to you since you got home an hour ago." She pulled the bandage tightly and he winced in pain. When she looked back up at him, she was glaring. "Where were you? I haven't seen you this angry before. *Ever.* "

Minako seemed content to be patient with him while he focused on what the hell he had been doing. He clearly *beat* the life out of something, but he would have remembered if it was a human. The gym. He went to the gym. He remembered freaking out one of the kids that stood a few meters away from him. Why did he go to the gym? He was pissed. He heard Amamiya's voice. When? Over the phone. He said something to him that made him snap…

Makoto. It had to deal with Makoto.

Cops .

He felt something latch on to his wrist. "Calm down, Aki."

"My bosses know about Makoto."

Minako's eyes widened for a second, but then she shook her head. "They probably don't *know* ."

Akihiko clenched his hands and pulled himself out of her grip. “They would have *killed* her had I not been there. All because she’s my *daughter* .”

“Aki, stop it.” Minako shoved him back into the chair he was sitting on and narrowed her eyes. “Listen to me. This isn’t your fault. Makoto’s fine. She’s out with her friends. I’m sure she will use more caution next time.”

He slapped her hands off of him. “Don’t you get it? This is exactly why I made this decision all those years ago! Nothing happened back then because I didn’t go out in public with you! Now they know how to use me! And how the hell am I supposed to be proud of what I’ve done as a cop if they can hold your lives over my head and-,”

“Enough.” Minako didn’t reach out to him and chose to ball her hands into fists at her side as her outlet. “So what are you going to do now? Cut ties with your *daughter* because you need to let your bosses know you don’t have *feelings* for her when they might already *know?* What is wrong with you?”

“Makoto could have been *killed!* ”

“I know you worry about your children’s safety, but you can’t shield them forever.” She was losing steam, but he was gaining his ground. “I can’t go back to being locked up in this house because you’re too afraid to show people you love me, or your kids. And nothing happened to Makoto because you were *there* for her. You always will be.”

He threw himself to his feet. “You don’t understand. I never would have known had Amamiya not asked Sakamoto for my number. Makoto would have been *killed* and all because I’ve let the world know I would do anything for her!”

There was a deafening silence that followed his retort. It allowed him to find his breath, to reign in his anger, his fear, things he thought had died weeks ago. But when Minako said nothing more to him before she wandered off into the kitchen, he honestly didn’t know what to do.

Everything was ultimately his fault. He was the one who demanded no one share his name, nor leave a paper trail to prove otherwise. He was the one who missed out on so much of Sae and Makoto's childhood outside of the home because he didn't want to be seen with them. He was the one who was still losing sleep over Sae's anger. He was the one who, in the end, couldn't stick to the decision he made and stepped out into the world to enjoy some time with Minako and Makoto outside of the home.

And now that came back to haunt him, just like every other *fucking* thing he ever did in his life.

Akihiko chose to stay in the living room and examine the oddly impressive work Minako did on his hands. The wrappings were tight, but not overly, and she must have used some sort of soothing cream to ease the pain. He stared at his hands for several minutes, wishing he had either the strength to fight against those who *dared* to threaten his family or to let his family go completely.

He couldn't keep believing there was middle ground anymore.

But could he really walk away from Minako and Makoto after everything they had been through? Would that even keep them safe anymore?

He was thankful the door opened a minute later so he didn't drown in his thoughts. "M-Makoto?"

Minako came out from the kitchen and met Akihiko in the entryway once Makoto was fully inside. She looked at both of them, but he noticed she had on a different shirt. Why? And why was she just now coming home?

"Where have you been?"

Minako stood in front of him. "That's a nice shirt you have on."

He could have sworn he saw Makoto blushing. "O-Oh. M-My other one had…something on it."

Akihiko stepped around Minako and spoke to their daughter even as Minako grabbed at his arm painfully. "Why did you go with them?

They could have killed you."

"Aki."

But surprisingly, Makoto's eyes began to narrow at him. "I didn't think they would try and hurt me."

"They know about you." Minako's grip tightened. He ignored it. "You need to stay away from them. And everyone. You can't trust anyone anymore."

"Don't listen to him." This time, Minako yanked on his arm hard enough that he fell back a step. "I want to hear more about how *your* night went."

Had Minako's nails not dug into his arm, he may have put up a better fight to keep reminding Makoto that they had been lax. Things needed to go back to how they had been. He was dead to her, just like her mother. She only had a sister. A sister *he* had killed in some twisted world…but he would work on that later. Right now, he needed them to understand…

He would *not* hold another funeral for someone he loved for as long as he lived.

Minako and Makoto took their seats on the couch in the living room, leaving Akihiko behind to think by himself for a second or two. Sadly for them, he didn't have to think for too long as he stood before both of them and interrupted whatever they were talking about.

"From now on, I don't want you to speak to me in public. I can't train with you anymore. I won't take you to Sae's palace. You can't tell anyone-,"

"I need to tell Ren the truth."

Akihiko could feel the bandages tear at his raw skin when he curled his hands. "What did I just tell you?"

But Makoto held his glare with one of her own. "It doesn't matter. Those cops would have come after me whether or not they knew I was your daughter."

“They could have gone after Sakamoto just as easily, but they went after *you* .”

He lost some of his traction when he saw a familiar fire burning in Makoto’s eyes. Minako had the same look whenever she was growing angry with him. “Do you know what Ren thought about our relationship when he first asked?” Her eyes hardened. “He…He asked me if we were *dating!”*

Minako threw a hand over her mouth, likely to hide the fact she found something *amusing* , but Makoto’s shout literally punched him so hard in the stomach that it *hurt* . He thought he was going to be sick. “What?”

Makoto was on her feet the next second. “He thought we were *dating* . Because he knew you cared about me. And then he kept asking about you, about Mitsuru, about Mom, and I panicked and told him you were *dead* .”

He fumbled again when he saw the tears beading up in her eyes and he couldn’t find his voice in time. “I know how you feel. Having to lie to cover up another lie and then it’s all one giant mess. But unlike you, I’m *tired* of it. I trust Ren. And it’s not fair that he can be open and honest with me when I can’t do the same in return because of *you.”*

Amamiya thought they were *dating?* Oh, when he saw that boy again… “This is for your safety, Makoto.”

“Then I would rather be dead.”

Makoto walked around him when he just stood still, frozen by her tone, her words, her *anger.* “I’m going to tell him, whether you like it or not.” He thought he heard a sniff from behind him. Or he was just numb from everything and was hearing things. “I’m not going to lose someone who finally cares about *me* because of your absurd fear.”

The sound of the door slamming shut is what brought him back to attention. His hands were burning. Everything was burning. He was so *angry* . Why would Makoto willingly throw her life away over a *boy?* She hadn’t even *known* him for long. Yet she wanted to

jeopardize her safety, her sister's safety, and her mother's safety just to prove a point?

"Get over yourself Akihiko."

He may have been slightly upset that Minako never said anything in his defense. "If Makoto tells him who we are, how many other people is she going to tell? How many people are going to *hurt* her to get back at me?"

"None." Minako's expression was neutral, but she was seething on the inside. He could tell. "Not one person will care if Makoto says anything."

"You can't honestly believe that."

Something flashed in her eyes. "And what's it going to cost you?" She pointed a finger over his shoulder to where Makoto had stormed off minutes ago. "It's going to cost you your last daughter, Akihiko. And I swear to god if you lose her, you'll lose me. You'll lose everything."

The walls began to collapse around him again. But Minako continued to vent as she stepped into him. "You have no right to take the first shred of happiness away from my daughter because you're a damn coward."

Her words acted like a dull knife that she wedged right into his heart. It was the same fight every single time the subject came up. But this was different. This wasn't him freaking out about a *what if* . They were *real* threats. Makoto had been caught and cornered by a criminal who had wanted him dead. Then she had been caught and cornered by his superiors so they could use her as a means to get what they wanted from him. One day, if he didn't call it quits before then, someone would succeed. And at the rate everything was happening, he feared it would be sooner rather than later.

"I'm not a coward." His voice was hoarse, but he had to push on. "This is the only thing I can think of to protect them. Today. Tomorrow. For the rest of their lives."

Minako took a slow inhale and released it just as slowly. “You have a choice to make. I just want you to be aware of the consequences.”

Akihiko couldn’t contain the bitterness any longer. “It’s not like this is the first time you’ve threatened to leave me.” He felt that bitterness thicken in the back of his throat. “How many more times are you going to say that before you actually mean it?”

Her hand came hard and fast. “I *love* you, Akihiko. *That’s* why I haven’t left you! But just like Makoto, I’m *tired.* I’m tired of being caught in the middle! Do you know what you ask of me when you act like this?! *Do you?!* Do you know how hard it is trying to tell your children that you do all of this because you *love* them while they sit and scream at me because you *hurt* them?! You cost me one daughter. I won’t let you force the other one out of my life.”

He wasn’t sure how he was feeling; a perfect in-between of furious and hurt. “So why are you still here?”

Minako wiped a hand over her eyes. “Because even when I’m so upset with you, even when I’m this close to giving up, I see how much you’re hurting, and I know I can do something to help you.”

“And now maybe you’ve done all you can.”

She struggled to find something to say back to him, but Akihiko didn’t wait for her to speak back up. “And maybe I see the damage I’ve done to this family, and maybe this is the only way to say I’m sorry.”

He tried to move past her, but her hands grabbed at the fabric at his chest and pulled him into her. “You promised your daughter that you would always fight. And now you’re walking away?”

Was this how it felt to finally *give up?* It was a terrible feeling. But the person who often gave him his strength no longer had faith in him. So why would he keep fighting? “I’m sorry that I question how someone could love me when she keeps telling me she’s going to walk out on me. And how she was my only source of strength for half of my life. So why would I? Why won’t you let me quit? You clearly don’t care.”

Minako finally released him and it was harder than he thought to pretend he didn't just break her heart in two. "Fine." More tears fell from her eyes, but it was hard to see through all of his. "If that's what you want, Akihiko, I won't stop you."

She turned sharply, but then came to a stop just as quickly. Akihiko figured she was going to say something else to him, even if he knew nothing more needed to be said, but then he heard another voice.

"D-Don't…please…"

He felt sick to his stomach. He was lightheaded. How the hell did all of this start? How the hell was he about to accept that Minako no longer loved him and was going to leave him for good and now Makoto was never going to be happy again? How was all of this suffering *worth* it?

"It's alright, Makoto." Minako's tone was soft and kind, but forced. He saw her rubbing at her eyes more often. "Go to bed."

Makoto came to stand between the two of them. It killed him to see an equal amount of tears spilling onto her face. "I won't say anything to him. Please. Please don't do this. I'm sorry."

Minako looked over her shoulder at him, but this time, he was a coward and looked away. "Your father doesn't want you to get hurt. If he leaves, it may be for the best."

"No!" Makoto ran up to him and grabbed both of his arms until his eyes locked with hers. "Please, Dad. I won't tell Ren. He'll understand. I promise. Please don't leave." Her voice cracked. So did whatever was left of his heart. "Please…"

There might have been some lingering bitterness about Minako's looming threat to leave him, but the second Makoto wrapped her arms around him, Akihiko knew he could never walk away from her. How he even thought he *could* was beyond him. He held her back tightly, hiding his own tear-stained face in her hair.

"I'm so scared someone is going to hurt you because of me." It hurt so much to talk. "I want you to stay small and weak and

defenseless, so I can protect you. Forever."

Makoto rubbed her face against his chest. "I will…if you want me to…if you stay…with Mom…"

Akihiko glanced up to Minako as she took a step closer to them. "You're not small. You're not weak. And you're not defenseless. Your father needs to understand that." Her eyes landed on him. "Is this what you want for your daughter, Akihiko? Because she's not *living."*

Makoto pulled back, somehow, and turned to Minako. "It's okay, Mom. I want you to be happy."

"If your father can't see what I see right now, then I'm not going to *be* happy." She placed her hands on Makoto's shoulders. "I want you to be able to talk to me about this boy, about the adventures you and your friends go on, what you want to do in the future. You can't do that if you're chained to the past." She lifted her eyes to his again. "You of all people should understand that."

He wisely kept his mouth shut, but he knew he didn't have anything to say to her to discredit her statement. "I want you to be happy, Makoto." He took a step away from both of them. "And maybe your mother is right. I don't want to hurt you, because then I'm not keeping you safe. But that's all I've ever done to you."

Makoto twisted out of Minako's hold to fully face him. "I want to tell Ren the truth. But…maybe…you can get to know him better first." She looked behind her to her mother. "Both of you can get to know him better. And then I can ask you again later." Her hands came together in front of her, a typical nervous gesture. "I-Is that…okay?"

Akihiko felt Minako's burning stare, but he finally nodded his head. Makoto was willing to compromise, and it would be selfish of him to turn it down. "Alright."

However, Makoto's posture remained unchanged. "S-So…are you going to, um…stay?"

A sad and pathetic laugh came out of his mouth. "I don't think your

mother wants me to."

Makoto looked over to Minako with fearful eyes, but Minako scowled at him. "I'll sleep on the couch tonight."

She walked down the hall to their room, likely to gather her things, then Makoto turned her face back to him. "Please don't go."

He was strong enough to place a hand on her shoulder. "I think your mother and I need a few days to calm down. Okay?"

Makoto offered him a subtle nod before Minako came back into the room. She said nothing to him, but once she threw herself onto the couch, he knew better than to try and talk to her. Makoto at least wished her a goodnight, then Akihiko escorted her to her room.

"Don't leave, Dad," was all she said to him before he reached out and ran a hand through her hair.

"I won't, not tonight." He leaned in to kiss her forehead. "I just need some time."

It was hard as hell to fall asleep. Not that it wasn't unusual for him to fall back onto the bed and stare at the ceiling for hours and hours until the sun gave him a reason to get up. But it was different this time. He could usually drift off listening to Minako's breaths, or holding her against his chest, or just looking over at her while she slept peacefully. All he had to distract his mind was the erratic sound of his own heart. The darkness was suffocating him. Every time he moved his hand to stretch over to where Minako would have been, it was cold. Lifeless. Empty.

Could he really walk away from her without losing his mind? It was one night. One miserable and lonely night. She was sleeping under the same roof. He knew where she was. But it wasn't good enough. Hadn't he learned the first time she walked out of his life that he couldn't *make* it unless she was *physically* with him? Hadn't he lost her once, when she was *dead* , and that first afternoon once he landed in a foreign country had almost been *his* last?

He loved her. And he would be a fool to admit he could ever think

otherwise.

But he also knew she needed time. At least tonight. He could try and talk to her in the morning. Assuming she didn't leave him then. Would she at least come in and tell him goodbye before she did? So he could try and stop her? Would she even listen to him?

What if she doesn't love me anymore?

Minutes turned into hours. But eventually, his mind was able to stop spinning and shut off for a few minutes of much needed sleep. At least, he thought he was asleep. He assumed it was another nightmare when he was surrounded by a sea of darkness with a massive red cloud down the way. While it was pitch black, he could still *see* . He could still *feel* , like he was actually there. Hadn't he been on the bed?

He was prepared for another shadow version of Sae, or maybe even one of his entire family. He sure didn't feel like he could fight, but besides losing most of his strength, he felt *chained* . Heavy. Immobile. He opened his mouth to say something, but he couldn't even do that. But he could blink. He could see. The reds and blacks were making him sick.

Then he heard a laugh. It wasn't a familiar laugh. It was cocky. Arrogant. *Evil* . It wasn't Sae. It wasn't Minako. It wasn't Makoto. It could have been a number of other people, but he was relieved this nightmare wasn't centered around his terrible life decisions and his inability to keep his family together.

"I've been waiting several years for this chance to meet you here, Sanada."

Even in his nightmares before and after Sae's palace, Akihiko never understood a voice. But this was clear as day. As if someone was whispering in his ear. Was he really awake? And if he was, who was in the home that wasn't supposed to be? And how the hell did they know who he was?

The desire to protect his family surged through him, but he was rudely reminded that he couldn't *move* . Another laugh echoed in the

space he was in. A man. If he could focus his mind for five seconds he might have been able to figure out who it belonged to.

But then he saw someone step out of the shadows. It looked like one of Ken's Featherman action figures. All black. Was there a Black Featherman? He didn't think so…

Then he saw the gun. "I truly don't want to do this, but…you leave me no choice. We can't have someone as intelligent as you sticking your nose into our business."

What was happening? Was this real? It sure as hell felt real. Did that mean someone had already killed Makoto, and Minako? Why hadn't he heard anything sooner? Why couldn't he *speak?!*

The masked man pulled the trigger, but then came a blinding light. Was he dead? He sure didn't feel dead. Not from a bullet wound. Maybe from a heart attack. But once the light faded, he realized what had happened.

Caesar .

Remnants of the shock could be seen on the ground. Someone could easily *feel* the static in the air, almost as if his persona encased him in an electric shield. But it was weird. Akihiko didn't *call* for him. He didn't even know he was in serious danger until the gun came into view. How did he just pop up if he didn't know where he was?

However, his opponent didn't seem fazed. He took aim again, but Caesar sent out another bolt of lightning to ward off his attack. The process repeated itself several times until the masked figure lowered his weapon.

"This is unexpected."

Yeah, no shit.

Instead of lifting the gun or drawing another weapon, the masked man grumbled beneath his breath. "Fine. I have no choice."

Suddenly, there was another being in the massive and dark hall.

The other enemy vanished in a cloud of darkness, leaving Akihiko to believe he had witnessed a transformation of some kind. What remained was large, tall, thin, dizzying to look at for long *thing* . Black. White. Horns. A lengthy sword.

Fight .

Akihiko hadn't heard that voice in *years* .

Fight.

He didn't know how. He didn't know *what* he was fighting. He sure as hell had no idea if it was even *real* .

Fight!

"Kill him, Loki!"

He expected another powerful electric attack to fend off the sword that was coming towards him. Why couldn't he *move?* However, as he braced himself for the impact, there was a *clash* of metal. Standing before him was his persona, Caesar, in the flesh, just like he remembered from the last time he had seen him years ago.

"C-Caesar?"

Fight.

Right. He may not have a clue what was going on, but he had to do something. A powerful shockwave pushed against his chest, but the weird looking enemy was flung back by a well-aimed strike.

Fight .

If he was going to fight, he wasn't going to half-ass it.

"Damn you!"

Why did that voice sound familiar all the sudden?

Keep fighting, Akihiko.

He blinked and he was somewhere else. Dark. Suffocating. But he

felt something on his chest. It wasn't heavy, but given whatever the *fuck* had just happened, it was slightly unnerving.

"Caesar?"

"It's okay, Aki."

That wasn't Caesar's voice. Akihiko turned and even with the dim lighting, he could make out Minako's profile in the darkness. "M-Minako?"

"I couldn't sleep…so I…I came in here in hopes that I could be up before you so you would never know I was here." Her voice was quiet, timid almost, and it worried him. "But then I noticed you were having a nightmare, so I wanted to wake you up."

It was all a nightmare? But it felt so *real* . "Caesar…he protected me."

He felt Minako scoot closer to him on the bed. "From what?"

He may never even know himself. "There was another persona… Loki…I think…Caesar was fighting against him…"

"What?"

There was no way that *wasn't* real. "And…and there was someone else. He was trying to kill me."

Minako was quiet when she spoke. "Who?"

The images slowly came back to him. "Some guy with a black mask."

Chapter 67

Chapter 67

Makoto was thankful that summer break had officially started or she would have slept through her alarm.

She wasn't one to sleep in. She liked to go to bed at the same time and rise at the same time. It was a form of training. But as of late, she had been waking up every hour, falling asleep later, and being unable to fall back asleep if she woke up too early. She had been out too late with Ren (she felt her face warm at the memories) and then came home to take part in the destruction of her family.

First, she couldn't help Sis.

Now, she couldn't help her parents.

There was an annoying *buzz* by her ear, but when she tried to swat it away, her hand hit the edges of her phone. Half-asleep, she reached for her phone to see who had texted her, sighed quietly when she noticed it was a group text amongst her friends, but then she saw the time.

1035.

Makoto had *never* slept in that late before. She quickly tossed her blankets off of her and went about her morning routine twice as fast. That would likely explain why she was *starving* , but once she walked out into the living room, no one was there to greet her.

Her mom had said she would sleep on the couch that night, so did she? Did her and her dad make up after she went to bed? Or, did her mom leave the second she knew no one would notice? Her mom always liked to keep a clean and tidy house, but she must have gotten up in a rush off the couch or was tossing and turning all night before she left. The blankets were still there, thrown haphazardly over the back, the arm, one on the floor…

“You’re up pretty late.”

Makoto threw a hand over her mouth and quickly turned around to find her mother grinning at her. “Did Ren wear you out last night?”

Her surprise was replaced with burning embarrassment. “N-No!” Did she want to tell her mom that it was her fear of losing both of her parents that had kept her up all night? “Um, i-is Dad…still here?”

Her mother’s face became more solemn, but Makoto didn’t know if that was a good thing or a bad thing. “He’s asleep, for now. He had a bad nightmare and it took me a while to put him back to sleep.”

While Makoto was relieved and happy hearing that the two of them didn’t *hate* each other, she was also curious to know more about her father’s condition. “Is he okay?”

Her mom took a seat on the couch she had slept on for however long she had. “He’s been having nightmares for weeks. I know he worries about your sister.” Makoto’s heart clenched in her chest. “And I know he worries about you. But this was different.”

When her eyes met with Makoto’s, she felt the air around them grow heavy. “O-Oh?”

“He said he was fighting, but said it all happened in his mind?” Her mom heaved a sigh. “I don’t know what’s happened to him after you took him to that palace place, but no matter how hard he tries to deny it, something snapped in him.”

The admission dropped on Makoto’s shoulders painfully and it knocked the wind out of her. “This is my fault.”

Her mom shook her head slowly. “No, last night was different. He didn’t fight your sister like he usually does. He said he fought against someone in a black mask wielding a persona.”

Makoto felt everything just *stop.* Someone in a black mask? Was it the same person that Kaneshiro had spoken about after they had defeated him? The same one who was causing the mental shutdowns? But…why would he target her dad? How long had he been fighting him? It had to be the same guy. He had a *persona* ,

meaning he could access the Metaverse. But…why would her dad be in the Metaverse in a dream…?

“Makoto?”

Why? Why was this happening to her family? Why couldn’t one thing go *right?* Why couldn’t they all be happy for once? Just *once?*

“Makoto.”

The hands on her shoulder shook her to snap her out of her worries. Her mom knelt before her with a concerned look in her eyes. “Do you know what’s going on?”

Did she? Kind of. Did it make sense? No. But there was someone she could ask that might have those missing answers. But if Makoto wanted to talk to Morgana, she would have to talk to Ren, which meant she would have to come clean with him about her family. She doubted she could dodge the issue unless she had more time to *think* . However, if her dad had already been labeled a target, she didn’t know how much time he had left before something happened to him.

“I have to tell Ren.”

Her mom stared back at her with a confused expression, then her hands fell from her shoulders. “What does that have to do with what I told you?”

“Ren might know how to help.” Makoto had to blink back a few tears. “Kaneshiro…he told us about this guy in a black mask going after people like we do, but *killing* them instead of redeeming them…like we do…” She closed her eyes, then exhaled deeply. “And I know myself well enough to know that I’m going to get flustered when I start talking about it and I’ll just leave him confused and I won’t get any help.”

She felt the spot next to her give as her mom took the seat beside her. “You should bring him over here then.” She chuckled when Makoto’s eyes grew wide at the suggestion. “You shouldn’t have to bear this weight on your own. Your father may not be happy with it,

but I know he's just scared because he doesn't know Ren like you do. I'll talk to him while you're out, okay?"

"Y-You…you want me to bring him… *here?"* Her mom couldn't seriously think that was a good idea. Not only would her dad get angry again, *Ren* would be scared to death! She didn't want to do that to either of them.

"Well then," her mom started once Makoto was over her initial shock. "I know your dad doesn't want to be seen in public, especially after what's happened. Unless there's a safe spot you know about?"

She was far too rattled to come up with a good answer. "I'll…uh, ask him…" She was thankful that the phone in her hand went off the next second. "Oh. I should probably go. But I'll…I'll let you know…"

Before Makoto could reach the door, her mother called out to her. "Makoto, I know we don't tell you this enough but, we love you. Your father and I. I wish there was more I could do for the both of you when I see you torn up like this."

It took more strength to fight back her tears than she thought she had. "I-I know. I'm sorry if I've hurt you, or Dad, but at the same time, I want you to trust me." She took a deep breath. "And I would never do anything to hurt this family."

Makoto heard light laughter behind her. "I want you to stand up for what you feel is right, Makoto. No matter who you feel you upset. Because those who matter will always be there for you in the end."

Her head dropped to her chest. "E-Even Dad?"

"Even your father."

Makoto walked out of the apartment feeling more heavy and torn up than when she woke up that morning. Did her mom want her to stand up to her dad? Wouldn't that start a fight? Makoto knew she would lose that fight in a heartbeat, but she also knew that no one would come out a victor.

Maybe she understood why her dad wanted her to stay little and defenseless. It was *easy.*

It didn't take long to get to Ren's (plus she was distracted the entire way over). But when the little bell chimed as she opened the door, she saw Sakura-san standing beside Ren at the coffee siphon. Makoto didn't say anything, but she stood in the entryway, confused. Weren't they supposed to meet today?

And then Ren looked over at her. She could feel the heat spread over her face when his serious expression turned into something more familiar and playful and *cocky* . Sakura-san grinned as well, then nodded his head at Ren who untied the green apron he was wearing and carefully placed it under the bar.

He met her in the same spot she had been standing since she had walked in. "You missed me that much, huh?"

She should have expected a sly and charismatic retort from him, but even if she came prepared for anything, she would never be able to *not* blush around him. It frustrated her. "I-I um…I thought we were meeting…?"

Ren's satisfied grin did not go away. "Yeah, a little bit later. Ann had some morning duties to tend to and I told Sojiro I would work in the shop this morning."

Oh. Had she missed those messages? Why did she feel compelled to just *show up* ? She really didn't remember a specific time so…

"But we have a lot to catch you up on, so this might be good." His smile changed into something more charming. Or were all his smiles charming now? "Do you want some coffee? I might not be a master yet, but I can make you something." She felt a hand brush over the side of her face. She jerked at the contact. His fingers were warm. "You look tired."

On instinct, she pulled away. "I…I may have slept in…too long." It wasn't a lie, she reminded herself. But the fact that Ren's face fell because she didn't tell him the *truth* pulled at her heartstrings. "I…I might want to…um…speak to you."

While Ren didn't seem overjoyed by her comment, Makoto could tell he was very eager to listen. He stepped to the side and extended his

hand towards the stairs. “Well, then let’s talk.”

There was an exchange of facial expressions between Ren and Sakura-san, but Makoto had no idea what they meant. Hopefully Sakura-san wasn’t disappointed with her. He hadn’t been the most thrilled when she had first met the man. He likely knew her sister, but Makoto didn’t want to think any more about that…

Ren’s hand met the small of her back as he escorted her up the stairs. She almost turned to him and told him that she could walk on her own, but she didn’t want to offend him this early into their conversation. Morgana greeted them as the cat stretched out his back and hopped off the bed and onto the floor.

“You’re so diligent, Makoto!” Morgana’s eyes practically sparkled. “It’s so nice to have a strategist who takes her role seriously!”

His praise was unfounded, at least to her. If she was good at anything, it would be *hiding* when everyone around her was trying to help.

Ren came up behind her and startled her. She could feel his breath on her neck. “You need to learn to take a compliment, you know?”

Truth be told, she needed to learn how to do a lot of things… “There…there’s something I need to get off my chest…”

Ren circled around her, but only reached out to her when she dropped her head. “Makoto, it’s okay. There’s no judgments here. Whatever you say will stay in this room, alright?”

Her eyes found Morgana’s, and the feline stared back at her with an occasional flip of his tail. Then she lifted her eyes to meet Ren’s. “I… I need your help.”

He offered her his hand, which she hesitated in taking, but then he led her to sit beside him on the bed. He was too close for her liking, but yet, too far away at the same time. “You can ask me anything you want.”

Why did he make it sound so *easy?* “I…” How was she going to tell Ren that her parents were *alive* and that he *knew* them and then

how was she going to tell him about her dad's dream or whatever it had been? Should she wait to tell him until they got to her place? But then how would she ask Ren to leave at all? Wouldn't he find that strange?

"Makoto." A hand fell over both of hers resting on her lap. She couldn't bring herself to look over at Ren. "I promise it's okay. You can tell me anything you want. I want to help you."

If she hesitated any longer, she would never say anything to him and she would be back at square one when her father needed her help. "I…" She paused to take in a shaky breath. Ren's hand was warm and comforting. "I lied to you about my parents."

She expected Ren to panic or start yelling at her or something *bad* . But his hand only tightened over hers. Morgana even came to sit in front of her, quiet and patient and *understanding* .

Everything else flowed out of her soul. "I've been forced to lie about them since I was old enough to understand why I had to. I didn't mind it, because I never really had any friends until now. But…but my dad had a nightmare or a vision or something and he mentioned a guy in a black mask trying to kill him and I don't know what to do."

That was the first time she sensed any surprise from Ren. His grip over her hands got weaker and he leaned back slightly. "What?"

But Makoto shook her head. "My mom wants to talk to you about it. About them. About all of this because she doesn't think I should do this alone." Through her blurring vision, she turned over to face him. "I'm sorry. I just started to panic and I've been telling you one lie after another because I didn't want to betray them…" Her eyes squeezed shut. "But this could be the same black mask guy Kaneshiro told us about. And if that's true, he's trying to kill my dad. I don't understand. He's not a bad person. He's been through so much. I have to protect him."

"He might have a shadow in Mementos."

Makoto violently shook her head. "No. He can't. He's a *good* person!"

Morgana lifted himself from the floor to stand on all fours. “I don’t mean it like that. But people can be really depressed, and that can lead to the birth of a shadow, too. At least,” he replied quietly as he sat back down in thought. “I think that’s true.”

She was suddenly aware of Ren’s hand squeezing hers again. “If that’s true, then we can head to Mementos and find out today.” His voice sounded so confident. “I know the others would be willing to help, too.”

“No.” She took another deep breath to relax. “My dad doesn’t have a shadow. He’s a good person. He *loves* me, and my sister, and my mom. *So* much! Why would that happen to him?”

“Shadows are just the desires of someone’s heart who’s losing control.” Morgana also spoke with confidence. “Someone could be too focused on the past, regrets, doing too much good, and that could birth a shadow if not careful. I don’t think it makes someone a *bad* person. They just need a little guidance before things escalate. So, if you don’t mind me asking, what all has he gone through? It might help us understand your situation more…”

“Stop.” Ren’s voice resonated in her bones. “We don’t even know if this is the same black mask guy or not.” He shifted on the bed next to her and grabbed both of her hands with both of his. “I know you want to help him, and I want to help however I can, so I’ll come with you to talk to your mom. Or…your dad…even though that might be intimidating. B-But that way we can know for sure.”

Makoto nodded her head several times until she felt Ren’s hands hold her steady. “I’m glad you’re telling me all of this, Makoto.” The mist returned to her eyes. “So…thank you.”

She was confused as to why he was thanking her. She had lied to him originally, and he had every reason to be angry with her. But he wasn’t. If anything, he was very forgiving and understanding. *She* needed to be the one to thank him.

“Y-You’re not mad at me…at all?”

Ren chuckled lightly. “I mean, if I’m being honest, I’m more surprised

than anything. But I can understand." A genuine smile spread over his face. "I didn't want to tell you my story because I was afraid you were going to turn me in to Sanada or another cop friend of yours."

Makoto bit her bottom lip. But either Ren didn't notice or he chose to ignore it. "And I remember bombarding you that day, so I'm sorry I backed you into a corner and left you no other choice of escape."

Should she tell him *who* her parents were, or should she just open the door, let him in, and let her dad beat the hell out of him? She *did* tell him Ren had thought they were *dating…*

"So I'm grateful you trust me enough to tell me this." His smile widened and her heart started to hammer in her chest. "It really means a lot to me."

He must have noticed or *felt* her blush because he was suddenly laughing in front of her. "You're so cute, Makoto." And then he stopped a second or two later. "Once we have our meeting, we can go figure out how we can help your dad, if he needs it. And if he does, we will work together as soon as we can. Until then, I won't say anything to the others until you feel you're ready."

She threw her hands over her face to hide her tears. Why was he so *perfect?* "Why aren't you mad at me?"

She thought she heard him chuckle again. "I think you're plenty upset for the both of us. Why would I be mad when you had to suffer this entire time?"

Her knuckles rubbed against her eyes. "You were so kind to me for so long, and then I lied to you. And I thought you would hate me."

"Is that why you were always so distant?"

Makoto let her head drop. "K-Kind of." She would leave the issue about her sister for later. As of right now, Sae's life wasn't on the line like her father's was. One crisis at a time.

"Well," Ren began as he pushed himself off the bed. "This proves that you trust me now. And I'll do whatever I can not to lose that."

He held out his hand with another smile. She slowly reached out to take it and he carefully pulled her to her feet. “I…uh…” She put some distance between the two of them before she burned him alive. “I forgot to bring your shirt back. I-I’m sorry.”

There was an odd sparkle to his eyes, followed by a smug grin. “I hope you wear it to bed and think that I’m cuddling with you when I can’t be there when you sleep.”

Her face smacked into his chest, uncaring if she scarred him. How could he say things like that with a straight face? But then she felt his hands wrap around her sides and meet behind her. She tensed at first, unsure of what she should be doing, but the longer she stood in his arms, the more relaxed she became.

She could already see her mom grinning madly at her saying, *I told you this would happen!*

But she chose to enjoy the moment while she had it.

Chapter 68

Chapter 68

Minako should have been thrilled finally being able to meet Ren the way she felt she should have met him the first time.

But she wasn't.

She was a little excited, but she knew she was going to have to fake most of it when Makoto brought him over. She always imagined the look of surprise on his face when Makoto introduced her as her mother. She may have secretly wanted to catch them on a date, holding hands, and maybe if she was lucky enough, Ren would kiss Makoto at the station before parting ways.

But the longer she sat in bed next to Akihiko while he tossed and turned, the more she worried she was losing him.

He didn't have the strength to go into work that day. He had been in and out of sleep for hours. The only time she thought she could leave his side had been when he laid flat on his back, eyes closed, and his breaths had evened out. But, whenever she came back to check on him, he was sitting up, wide awake, shaking, telling her over and over with tears in his eyes that he was sorry and he deserved to *die* .

Minako was unaware of what Makoto had been talking about before she left, but she was terrified Akihiko was running out of energy, heart, and willpower to fight off whatever was trying to *kill* him.

She had been able to get him to sleep again when she held him in her arms, used her hand to brush her fingers through his hair, and told him to keep fighting. Akihiko shifted in her arms every so often, but a tight hold and a few rocking motions were able to settle him down. She could tell he took comfort in her voice, so she would talk to him about whatever came to her mind.

The first day she had met him when she had tried avoiding his

fangirls and needed an unknown escape route out of the school.

The first day he told her he loved her, out of the blue, doing some basic stretches in his room together after their routine after-school jog.

The first day he tried to kiss her and missed, his lips landing right between her mouth and her nose. And how *she* had to be the one to kiss him several days later because he was too embarrassed to try again.

The first day she saw him holding Sae, and Makoto. How Sae would always listen to him whenever he said *no* , but then wouldn't listen to her. And how Makoto wouldn't listen to either of them.

She brought up more recent events; the first day he was willing to throw down his shield and meet with her and Makoto in public when their daughter had become student council president. The day he came home with flowers when Makoto had gone on her school trip. The day he had taken her to the festival and *kissed* her in the rain.

Minako felt so helpless, but she kept talking. She worried about when Makoto would be home, about the fact that she hadn't even thought about making dinner for a guest, if Ren had agreed to meet them. She couldn't leave Akihiko alone. What if her voice was the only thing he was holding on to, and she ripped that away from him and he finally caved?

"Minako?"

Hearing his hoarse voice made her flinch, but she soon felt a warmth cover the right side of her face. She looked down at him, his eyes opening slightly before they fell shut again, but there was a hint of a smile on his face that tore her heart in half.

"You're still here?"

She dropped her head into the crook of his neck, unable to bear the crushing weight of what he was asking. "I-I'm so sorry, Aki." How could she seriously think she could walk away from this man? After everything they had been through? Right when he needed her the

most. “I’m so sorry…”

The hand on her face fell to her shoulder and he gripped at her shirt. “Please…please forgive me…”

He sounded so weak, so frail, so unlike him. But she couldn’t find the strength to say anything, so she simply nodded her head, hoping he would understand.

“Please don’t leave me.”

Akihiko repeated himself in her silence until she pulled away from him, tears coating her cheeks, and grabbed his face with both of her hands so he would look at her. “I will never leave you. Ever. I promise you.” It hurt watching him try to focus on her, like he was looking right through her, but knew she was there. “Please…please keep fighting.”

A breath came out as a laugh. “I’m tired.”

“I know, Aki…” Her arms wrapped around his shoulders and squeezed tightly. “Makoto is bringing Ren over soon and she thinks he can help you. Everything is going to be okay, but you have to keep fighting.”

She bit back a small smile when he tensed after mentioning *Ren* , but Minako poked the fire because she thought it was helping him *burn* again. “You’re going to be meeting your future son-in-law. If he’s lucky, of course.”

“Stop that.” There was more life to his voice. It warmed her immensely.

Minako leaned her head onto his while she tried to tone down her smile. “Try to be nice, though. He’s a good kid, and you know that, too.”

“But how do I know he’s going to keep his mouth shut?” He sat up next to her, and even though he had a glare in his eyes, she was happy to see it. “He’s been trying to fish for secrets on me for god knows how long and-,”

She put her hands on his chest to stop him. “You trust Makoto, and she trusts him.” Then she giggled at him. “Besides, I’m pretty sure he will be terrified of you and wouldn’t dare do anything to anger you.”

“Good.” Akihiko took a deep breath, and for a second, Minako worried the banter was bringing him down again. “I don’t think I’m ready for this.”

“Aki,” she whispered, wrapping both of her hands around the one closest to her on the bed. “You don’t have to do this alone. I’m going to be here. Makoto will be there for you. And on the off chance my instincts are wrong about Ren, which I don’t think they are, I’ll be the one to make sure no one finds his body if you can provide my alibi.”

Minako beamed at him when she saw his lips curling into a smile. She just wished his eyes had more of the missing light to them. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Then, Akihiko grimaced and grabbed at his head. Minako’s hands landed on his shoulders. “Are you okay?”

One of his hands waved off her concern. “I’m just…tired…”

She didn’t want to leave him alone, even if it was just to sleep, so she came up with a solution. Maybe. “Come with me to the living room. I want you to be able to tell Ren your version of what’s going on. You can sleep out there until he shows up, okay?”

To her surprise, he nodded his head. Before he could get up out of the bed, Minako rushed over to his side to help support him. He leaned into her more than she was ready for, but she was able to turn herself in a way so she landed on the bed under him rather than in a heap on the floor. She waited a second or two to catch her breath, then opened her eyes to make sure he hadn’t twisted his knee or hurt himself because of her *weakness* .

She saw it then. That *spark* in his eyes. Her heart smacked against her ribcage once, then stopped beating all together. He lifted a hand to brush some of her loose hair off of her face and she knew then and there she was done for.

“I love you, Minako.”

She didn’t register grabbing at his shirt and pulling him down to her until his lips found hers in a deep, hungry kiss. She should have known better. He was tired, barely being able to support himself as he hovered over her, and a moment later, he collapsed on top of her. He whispered a weak apology, but she kept leaving a trail of butterfly kisses from his temple to his ear.

“I love you.” She repeated her words so many times she was sure he couldn’t hear them anymore. And as uncomfortable as she was, it was difficult watching him push himself up so he could rise to his feet.

“I-I’m sorry.” If the lights had been on in the room, Minako was *positive* she would have caught the flush on his face. Akihiko offered her his hand, to which she smiled as best she could through her tears and reached out for him.

He didn’t last much longer. The second his head fell to her lap on the living room couch, he was out. Minako at least managed to grab her phone before she sat down so she could keep in touch with Makoto, but once she had sent her a message asking her what was happening, her attention fell back to Akihiko. He at least looked peaceful for the moment, but every so often, her fingers would brush through the fringes of his hair, she would lean down to kiss him gently, or she would sit back and count out his breaths.

For so long now, Akihiko had been the backbone of their family. And now it was her turn. She had to help him. And she would. She would *not* lose him like this. Even if she had no idea what was happening, she would find out. He would not suffer alone.

Her phone *pinged* beside her. It was a quick message from Makoto saying that she was wrapping up with her friends and that Ren had “graciously” offered to help. Knowing Akihiko was fine for the time being, Minako couldn’t stop the smile that spread across her face.

If they weren’t a couple already, she really hoped they became one in the near future. She reached for one of Akihiko’s hands laying on his stomach and held it firmly in her own.

He's going to be okay.

The cycle repeated itself. She would study Akihiko's face, told herself he was fine, pictured Makoto walking to their apartment with Ren, then lightly squeezed the hand in hers.

He's going to be okay.

The knock on the door made her sit up straight, but she didn't want to get up. If she got up, she would wake Akihiko, and he had been sleeping soundly for almost an hour. However, as hard as it was to try and move him without disturbing him so she could answer the door, the second she was up, he jerked awake.

"M-Minako?"

Her heart snapped at the terror in his voice. "I'm right here, Aki." She ignored the second knock and sat on the edge of the couch beside him. "We're going to figure out what's wrong, okay?"

"Don't leave me."

"I'm…I'm not going to leave you." Great. Now she was going to have to speak to her daughter and her "friend" with tears streaming down her face. "I think Makoto and Ren are here, so I need to let them in so they can help you."

Despite his heart-wrenching sorrow, she laughed softly when he flinched hearing Makoto *and Ren* . "R-Right…"

But she didn't get up quite yet. "He's going to know about us being her parents." He hung his head, so she leaned forward and kissed the center of his hair. "You're not going to shoulder this pain alone anymore." She finally stood up, proud for once how *strong* she sounded. "And I'm not going to lose you over this."

Akihiko sighed heavily, but didn't say anything more to her as she walked around the couch and into the entryway to answer the door. She stopped for half a second, worried about her appearance and how she had always planned to be the bubbly and overly excited mother when her daughter brought a boy over to meet.

She hoped the sight of the two of them could make her half the energetic person she wanted to be.

But this wasn't for her. This was for Akihiko. The quicker they knew about what was happening to him, the quicker they could bring him back to her.

Minako at least was thoughtful enough to throw on a smile, regardless of how she felt on the inside. However, the moment her eyes landed on Ren, she noticed he took a half a step back.

She couldn't contain the laugh that came out of her mouth at his reaction. "Well, it's nice to see you again."

The poor boy stood in horrified silence, then turned his eyes to Makoto. She was nervous, Minako could tell, so she decided to spare her daughter the questions and took a step closer to Ren. "You act so surprised."

A moment later, he shook his head and wore a more neutral expression. "Sorry."

He seemed to be withholding something. He was unable to sit still. He never made eye contact with her. It was odd. He struck her as a confident and proud young man, but right now, he was everything but.

Minako's eyes landed on Makoto. "Go say hi to your dad, Makoto."

Makoto looked at her, then to Ren, then back to her. She slowly nodded her head, then walked around her into the apartment. Ren's eyes closed the next second and Minako knew he had something to say to her.

"Something on your mind, Ren?"

"You're cheating on her dad."

Now it was Minako's turn to reel back in shock. "W-What?"

His head remained lowered and it was hard to see his eyes through his hair. But she could have sworn he had a look of judgment on his

face. “I saw you with Sanada that night you were kissing him.” Minako almost slapped herself in the face, almost slapped him in the face, but she decided to let him keep talking. “And Makoto told me something is wrong with her dad. I’m not trying to be rude, but, this could very well be what’s happening.”

He didn’t take kindly to her laughter. “Since when are you such a drama queen?”

Then he lifted his head and there was something powerful in his expression. “When it hurts the people I care about.”

It took a lot of effort not to squeal and jump and grab him by the shoulders and hug him before she kneed him in the gut. Instead, she chuckled (annoying him again) and then leaned back against the hallway wall. “I’m not cheating on my husband, Ren.” She pushed off the wall and gestured towards the door. “And I would keep this conversation between the two of us if you want to walk home in one piece.”

Whether or not he agreed with her, the look was gone from his eyes and he walked through the door. She bumped into him when she followed after. She couldn’t tell why he had stopped, but she knew he was probably nervous. Even if nothing was happening between him and Makoto, he was still in *their* domain.

Minako was suddenly grateful Akihiko didn’t have to suffer the same when they first started dating. She probably would have lost him that same day. “I know you’re nervous,” she finally said in a hushed voice. “But we asked you here to help. I won’t think anything less of you if you walk out the door right now, or if you don’t understand what’s happening either.” She carefully placed a hand on his shoulder. It caught his attention and he turned his head to look at her. “I’m losing him. And this is the last thing I can think of to save him.”

She took a breath to hopefully lessen the burning behind her eyes. Ren opened his mouth to say something to her, but there was movement in his bag that startled her.

“My cat,” he said as he lowered the bag to the floor. “He knows more

about the Metaverse than I do. I figured he would be the best help."

Once the bag was open, Minako was greeted with a black cat with deep blue eyes. Her heart couldn't resist the urge to reach out and pet it, so she did. His fur was soft. The cat very much loved the attention.

"I'd be careful." There was a smirk on Ren's face. "Give him too much attention and I'm going to leave him here with you."

The cat then hollered at Ren, followed by a chuckle from the boy. The animal continued meowing as if he was speaking to Ren. It confused her. "I-Is he saying something?"

Ren threw his bag back over his shoulder with the cat inside. "Yeah. We can understand him because we've been inside the Metaverse, but no one else can."

That made no sense, but she decided that it probably never would. "Well, if you're ready, we can talk inside."

She felt bad for him as she watched him take a deep breath. So when he took one step, her hand reached out to grab his shoulder. "I'm not cheating on my husband, Ren."

This time, Ren stared back at her in confusion. The gears in his mind were working, she could tell, but he never got the chance to put it all together.

"Amamiya."

Akihiko looked so *tired* , but he was at least standing on his own with Makoto off to his side in case he needed her. Ren, however, likely wanted to take her up on her earlier offer to run out the door.

"S-Sanada?"

The poor boy was *terrified* . And as exhausted as Akihiko was, he was very intimidating, even to her. Minako walked around Ren and stood in front of Akihiko. "You need to sit back down." She looked over at Makoto. "Will you help him?"

Makoto quickly nodded and stood next to her father and wrapped one arm around his back. Akihiko tried to fight her off, but a no-nonsense look from her was all it took to make him stop. Once the two of them were situated in the living room, Minako turned back to Ren.

“I know you have a lot of questions, and I’m more than willing to answer them all. So please.” She bowed to him so he wouldn’t catch sight of the tears coming to her eyes. “Please help him.”

There was a *meow* , a few more, then she lifted her head to find a small smile on Ren’s face. He bowed his head to her. “When I first met you, I thought you were Makoto’s mother, and that you had something to do with Sanada. Whatever your reasons are, it’s not really my business.” He fully bowed to her this time. “I’m sorry for making these judgments about you, Arisato-san.”

She walked to stand directly in front of him once he straightened his back. “I will do anything if you can tell me how to help him.”

Another *meow* . Another nod from Ren. “Right. But…um.” His eyes dropped from hers and she felt her lips curling. “Can you…promise me one thing?”

She likely knew what he was going to ask when his hand rubbed the back of his neck. “Of course.”

“Promise me that I’ll walk out of here in one piece.”

Chapter 69

Chapter 69

Akihiko had been many things in life, but he had never been this *tired* .

He was so tired that he couldn't even stand without feeling faint.

He was so tired that he couldn't even think without getting sick.

He was so tired that he couldn't even *glare* at Amamiya as the kid took a seat next to Minako. (Smart move on his end, because if he sat next to Makoto, he would have used his last amounts of energy to throw the boy out the window.)

All because of one nightmare?

It had been ongoing, even when he was conscious. When he closed his eyes, he could see that black and white persona charging at him. He could *see* Caesar warding him off with either a physical attack or an electric one. When he was awake, he could feel the toll. His exhaustion creeped into his bones. He was sick to his stomach. His thoughts ran over each other until he was left with nothing.

He didn't know what was happening, but he knew that the longer Caesar fought in his subconscious, the more energy he was losing. That guy with the black mask must really want him *dead* if he was this tenacious. Wasn't that guy tired, too? How much longer was he going to have to *fight* before he lost that connection with Caesar and he was killed?

Keep fighting, Akihiko.

The only reason he didn't flop back onto the couch and tell everyone to ignore him and pass out was because *everyone* included *Amamiya* and he had many words to say to that little shit.

"Dad?"

Akihiko was on the edge of consciousness, but the quicker he got all of this taken care of, the quicker he could throw Amamiya out the window and go back to sleep. Maybe forever. “I’m listening.”

“Makoto said someone is trying to kill you in your nightmares?”

Amamiya? When he sat up straight, Akihiko could tell that yes, Amamiya had spoken to him, but god *damn* did he want to punch that boy in the face. How dare he think that he was dating his *daughter* and accuse Minako of *cheating* on *him* . “It’s just a nightmare.”

“Aki, you’ve had nightmares before, but they’ve never taken this kind of toll on you.”

Maybe he was getting too old.

Then came an unfamiliar voice. “Ask him about the guy with the black mask.”

It helped him to focus momentarily. “Wh-Who is that?” It sure as hell wasn’t Makoto or Minako. It didn’t sound like Amamiya unless he was doing an impression of some kind.

“You can understand Morgana.”

Morgana? Who the hell was Morgana? The spirit of death that kept taunting him? “It’s Ren’s cat, Dad.” He felt a hand on his forearm. “I-I took them to the Metaverse…”

The *cat?* The same cat that had saved Makoto back during Kamoshida? It could *talk?* He must have been more tired than he thought…

Suddenly, there was a ball of black sitting on the table in front of him. His first instinct was to beat at it because he thought it was a shadow of some kind, but then he saw the eyes. Big and blue.

Then he heard the voice. “We can talk about that later. Right now, we need to know if this is the same person who’s entering the Metaverse to hurt people.”

What the hell was happening? “Y-You can talk?”

The cat, Morgana, gave a simple nod. “Makoto mentioned that you’re fighting a masked man with a persona?”

Akihiko’s eyes locked with Minako’s for a second or two, but then she looked away. “This is different, Aki. It wasn’t until I told Makoto about the black mask person that she said she needed to help you.”

He sighed deeply. It felt good. “Look, it’s just a nightmare. I’ll be fine.”

“You don’t *look* fine.”

He gave Amamiya the coldest glare he could. It didn’t faze the boy in the slightest. “I don’t remember asking for your opinion.”

“This is more serious than you think.” The cat spoke. It was difficult to come to terms with a talking animal. “This masked man creates mental shutdowns by entering a person’s subconscious. If we don’t stop him, you could suffer one as well.”

Mental shutdowns? Where had he heard that…

The subway accidents. Those were the cases that Sae had been working on…

“We want to help you, but I’m afraid this brings up a point that may be hard to hear.” Akihiko made eye contact with Morgana, as silly as that sounded, but the room felt oddly tense around him. Makoto’s hand curled over his arm.

“The only way this can be happening is if you have a shadow.”

Akihiko almost, *almost* laughed. Maybe he should have. It probably would have made him feel better. “Why do you think that?”

It was Amamiya who spoke next. “Unless you’re physically fighting against this guy in the Metaverse, your cognition is fighting for you.”

Next to him, Makoto shook her head. “No. That’s not true.”

He suddenly felt tired all over again. Was Caesar still fighting? “It’s been a long few days, alright? I’m going to be fine.”

“I remember watching you fight that day, in the club, when you were trying to save Makoto.”

Amamiya’s tone and expression knocked Akihiko off balance. “What?”

“I admired you as I cowered in the back of the room. I was terrified that if I got caught, I would go back to jail. Or even worse, they were going to put a gun to *my* head and god knows what would have happened then.”

The corners of Amamiya’s lips turned. “You were shot, but you kept fighting. You had a gun pointed to your head, but you kept fighting.” The small smirk was replaced with a frown. “I don’t want to give you the impression that I know you well, but I can tell something has happened. Something has *been* happening because Makoto has been upset for weeks.”

“Ren…”

“And I’m not expecting you to trust me,” Amamiya continued, ignoring Makoto’s silent plea to stop him. “But you mean a great deal to Ryuji, to Makoto, and whether or not you believe it, you’ve meant a lot to me, too.” He exhaled. “I want to help, regardless of your reasons for keeping everything so secret, regardless of why you made Makoto lie to me, regardless of how badly you want to throat punch me right now.”

The kid had no idea how *badly* he wanted to…

Morgana added, “The quicker we go to Mementos, the quicker we can help you.” Akihiko buried his face in his hands, the weight of every past decision, mistake, and regret crushing what small part he thought was left of him. “But in order to do that, we need you to tell us what happened.”

There was a sniffle somewhere next to him. “This is my fault.” It happened again. “I told him I was…I was going to tell you the truth

and he got mad at me. But…I did it anyway…"

The couch moved underneath him and Minako came to sit on the other side of Makoto. "I don't think that's what this is all about, Makoto."

"I'm so sorry, Dad."

"This isn't your fault, Makoto." Christ had that been hard to say. But he was tired. Makoto should never have had to *suffer* because of him and his life choices. But just like Sae, he worried that he had taken a part of his youngest daughter that she would never get back.

And maybe it was too late to make amends. Maybe that was why he had a shadow again, if that was true. But even with all the damage he had brought to Makoto's life, to Minako's life, to Sae's life, if he could offer them the smallest chance of a painless future, he would do it in a heartbeat.

He only wished he didn't have to come clean to *Amamiya…*

"Before I met Minako, I wasn't strong enough to protect someone very precious to me." He could not *believe* he was being this open with a kid that minutes ago he wanted to toss out the window. "From then on, that was all I wanted to do. To be stronger. To keep myself from losing anyone else again."

One of his hands pulled at his hair, but the room was deadly silent. Perhaps he was finally alone after all. "I fought during the Dark Hour, even when I was told not to go out alone. I told myself if I died, I was weak. And if I didn't want to die, I had to fight harder. I may have had my fair share of close calls, but I always came back.

"Even after I met Minako, that was all I wanted to do. Even after I lost my best friend because I couldn't protect him, I told myself I had to fight for his sake as well. Because if I died without giving my all, he would murder me when I saw him on the other side."

He didn't need to look at Minako to know she was crying. He didn't need to look at Makoto to know she was interested in hearing about his past for the first time (from his mouth anyway).

“I promised Minako I would fight for her, for our friends, for the future I wanted to give to her, and I finally thought my resolution would keep me from losing anyone ever again. Everything was going to be okay.”

He paused to take a slow inhale before releasing it just as slowly. “But then Minako fell asleep in my arms and she wouldn’t wake back up, no matter how hard I shook her or called out to her. And…And I panicked. I *wasn’t* strong enough. I *couldn’t* protect anyone. Everything I had fought for had meant *nothing* to me.

“So I left. Crossed the ocean and put thousands of kilometers between my past in hopes that I could *become* something they would be proud of.” His fists clenched tightly. Why the *fuck* was he saying all of this? Why the *fuck* wasn’t Minako stopping him? “I came back a few years later to help a friend, to put that strength to use, and that’s when she told me that Minako was alive. Through some odd twist of fate, she had woken up a year after I left.”

Akihiko would *never* forget meeting Minako after his return for as long as he lived. “She screamed at me, told me that she was so *angry* with me for running away when there were people here that still cared about me, and I thought she wanted nothing more to do with me. I sure as hell didn’t deserve her.”

His exhale echoed in the silence. “But she told me she was willing to forgive me if I never left her again. And even though I was terrified that she would walk away, I wanted to keep her for as long as I could.

“But then I started working as a cop and I got my first death threat. It was a piece of paper on my desk, telling me that if I continued my investigation, someone would kill me.” He rubbed at his eyes. He was tired again. “It didn’t faze me in the slightest. Until a few weeks later, another showed up in the mail that told me they knew about my girlfriend and had eyes on her at every single moment.”

He grit his teeth as his hands supported his head. “I don’t know if any of them were legitimate, but it scared me. I wouldn’t lose her again. I *couldn’t* lose her. And that was why I asked her to keep her name so criminals would never find her. They would never take her

away from me. Because no matter how strong I was, I knew I couldn't protect her every single minute of every single day. And if my past told me anything, it was that I could be the strongest person in the world and I could still lose someone I cared about.

"I did the same to my children. My fear almost cost me my relationship with Minako, but it cost me my relationship with my daughter. No matter how hard I try to tell her I'm sorry, that I did all of this with the intent of keeping them safe, she still hates me. I didn't know how bad it was until we went to her palace and she screamed at me and told me I had *killed* her."

Akihiko finally turned to his side where Makoto and Minako were sitting. "I killed one of my daughters. I'm suffocating my other daughter. And you," he said as he met Minako's eyes. "You'll always hate me for doing this to your children." His vision blurred for a second. "That's why I'm scared one day, you're actually going to mean it when you say you're finally going to leave me."

Minako was on her feet and throwing herself into him before he could even blink. "I-I'm so sorry, Aki." She sobbed into his shoulder. The rest of the room faded around him. "This is all my fault. I-I hurt you…I hurt you like this." He didn't have the strength to hold on to her like he wanted to. "I-I'm so sorry…"

There was movement in the room that caught his attention. Amamiya stood from his seat, his eyes downcast, but his hands balled tightly at his side. His voice was quiet when he spoke. "It may not be my place to say this, but I wish my parents were half as loving as you."

Amamiya's eyes hardened with determination before he glanced over to where Makoto sat. "I'm going to take the team into Mementos. Tonight. Whoever can come. You don't have to go if you don't want to."

Akihiko knew Amamiya was saying something, but between his own inability to concentrate and Minako's cries in his ears, he couldn't make out much. He was going somewhere? What did he say before that? Something about his parents?

“No. I’m coming with you.”

Makoto was on her feet a second later. Amamiya nodded to her, then the cat jumped from his spot on the table to the floor. “It would be a good idea to take as many people as we can.”

He could have sworn Makoto nodded her head and played with her phone for a second. But his fears and doubts still lingered in his mind. He couldn’t focus on what was happening around him long enough to understand what was going on.

But Makoto wrapped her arms around both of them. “We’re going to save you, Dad. I promise.”

There was a look in her eyes that told him that she meant it. She would keep him safe. She would be his strength right now that he *needed* . He would have told her as much, but between Minako’s grip on his neck and his own exhaustion, he could only offer her a subtle nod of his head.

Minako wiped her face against his shoulder before she turned her head towards Makoto. “Where are you going?”

“To Mementos,” was all Makoto said before she was back on her feet. “And I’m going to be the strength you asked me to be before.”

“Thank you, Makoto.” Minako’s grip weakened, but she didn’t move. “Thank you.”

Amamiya bowed to them as Makoto walked up to them. “I’ll make sure to have her back before it gets too late.”

Both Makoto and Amamiya walked out of his sight and out the door before he could even protest the smirk on the boy’s face.

He should have thrown Amamiya out the window while he had the chance.

Chapter 70

Chapter 70

Ren had been completely silent from the walk from her apartment to the station. It unnerved her. Was he mad? He had taken her father's story rather well, at least…she thought he did…

Makoto, however, did not.

She thought of herself as a pathetic daughter. Her dad had been suffering for *years* , long before she had even been born, but she never once asked him about it. She only offered her strength when she *thought* he needed it, which was a fraction of the time he *actually* needed her.

Her sister might have thought he was a terrible dad, but he was the strongest person she knew.

"You okay?"

Hearing Ren's voice made her snap back to her current situation. They were waiting for the train to take into Shibuya. Ren stood by her side with Morgana perched up on his shoulder. Both of them eyed her curiously. Or perhaps they were judging her for her failure to be a good daughter. They should be.

"Ryuji said he was going to meet us at the station." Ren held out his phone. "I…I hope that's okay. If it's not, I can tell him not to worry, but, I kind of mentioned Sanada and I doubt he would pass it off."

Makoto shook her head, then let it drop to her chest. "No. It's okay. I appreciate it."

The silence was overwhelming. She knew they were thinking about something. Or everything. Why she had lied to them. Why she had taken her dad into the Metaverse. Why she had bothered introducing them to her parents at all. Why she couldn't have noticed her dad falling apart years ago to help him then…

She lifted her wrist to wipe at her nose to keep Ren and Morgana from hearing her sniffling. Where was the train?

“I’m kind of jealous, if I’m being honest.”

Makoto braved looking up at Ren, but was thankful he was staring ahead to the other side of the tracks. He seemed relatively calm as he put his phone back into his pocket. Both of his hands followed suit.

“My parents dropped me off at the station without a word. No goodbye. No ‘I’ll miss you’. No nothing. They fought a lot, mostly over money and my dad spending it on late night ventures, so they rarely had time for me. I can count on one hand the trips we took. I can count on one hand how many touching stories I could tell you about them. So I felt like I could understand our friends’ pain when they each had their own problems with their parents.”

He turned to look over at her, but instead of a cold, piercing glare, his eyes were warm and kind. “Your parents are great people. I’ve had a conversation with your mom before. She strikes me as a very caring person, for you, for anyone. I told myself after my shift that night that this must be what it feels like to talk to a mother. I just never made the connection.”

Makoto wanted to ask him where he had spoken to her, but it wasn’t important. He also cut her off. “And I don’t even know how to tell you how much I respect Sanada. He knew about my record, my fear of the police, but he was never hostile to me. In fact, he was very approachable and honest. Which you both have the same ‘deer in a headlight’ expression.”

He paused a moment to chuckle while she dropped her gaze to the tracks. “But my parents never would have fought for me. They *didn’t* fight for me. They would never have the courage to chase after me like Sanada did for you. Even if he was trying to keep your relationship a secret, he still loved you enough to dive right into danger and save you.” His jawline tightened and Makoto fought the urge to reach out for his arm.

“My parents didn’t have a gun to their head when the judge asked

them to speak in my defense. They didn't have a bullet in their leg after pushing past ten different men so they could tell my hometown that I would never assault anyone." Ren paused to take in a breath. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be saying this to you right now, given everything that's happened. But I just want you to know that I want to help. Even if I don't understand his reasons or yours, you're both great people who have suffered way too much."

Makoto squeezed her eyes shut while she tried to hide her face from Ren. Why was he like this? So understanding and forgiving? After all he had gone through, she would have thought he would have hated people more. But he didn't. He had been willing to risk going back to *prison* just to help with Kamoshida and Kaneshiro. He had done the same for Yusuke. He would likely do the same for anyone who needed it.

"I hope I didn't say too much…"

She lifted her head at the sound of concern in Ren's voice. She wiped at her eyes again before turning to face him. "I think you're a wonderful person, Ren. I wish I could be half as thoughtful as you."

"And I wish I could be half as strong as you." She could *hear* the grin on his face. "Two halves make a whole, right?"

He didn't make sense sometimes.

Makoto was about to question his statement when the train arrived at the station. Ren stepped into the car after her, his hand gently pushing her along at the small of her back. They opted to stand for the short ride, but his hand never moved. She didn't know what to do about it, so she said nothing to him as the train pulled out of the station.

She felt him step closer to her. "You can lean on me if you want. Before you pull that hand ring off the rails."

The blush was on her face before she let go. Had she been that tense? It would likely explain why her hand hurt. But…did he seriously want her to lean *against* him like he was a wall or something? Or had he meant that she could lean on him in a

support kind of way?

But before she could pick an answer out of the thousands that were swimming in her mind, Ren's hand moved from her back to her hip and pushed her against him. "Like this."

She noticed that his hand at her side was slightly unsteady, perhaps from the way the train was moving? She knew it couldn't be because he was nervous, even if she could hear his heartbeat, and it may have been beating as fast as hers…

"Better?"

She didn't understand what he had been trying to do, but she oddly felt more relaxed and at ease against him. Just like how she had felt when he held her earlier that day after she told him about her parents. It was nice, for as short as it had been, to feel like everything was going to be okay, her dad would be better come morning, and she could finally stop hiding from her friends.

However, when the train came to a stop and she had to leave that safe place of Ren's arms, reality reared back and slapped her in the face.

Makoto already had one run-in with her sister's shadow. She didn't want to see another one of her family members as something they were not. And even if she was okay with seeing it, she knew in order to *help* her dad, she would have to *defeat* her dad. She would have to be *stronger* than her dad.

"The only day you'll be able to say that is when I'm dead."

She had been to Mementos and fought others a few times and had witnessed the change afterwards. She wasn't going to *kill* him. He wouldn't *die* . He would feel better. And if she failed tonight, the guy with the black mask would return to finish him off.

If her dad was that tired after one night of fighting, he would be easy for the masked man to take out if her dad managed to fight her friends off.

No. She wouldn't lose. She would fight harder for him because he

needed her to be strong. She couldn't let him down.

"You're not alone."

She felt a weight on her shoulder, but Morgana's bright blue eyes were the first one's she saw. "We're going to help him, Makoto. You can count on us!"

The feeling she had now, she hoped it lasted forever. "Th-Thank you…both of you…"

Ren slightly nodded his head as his eyes looked over her shoulder. "Ryuji should be waiting for us at the old hideout. Let's go."

As the leader, she fully expected Ren to take off first. And he made more forward progress than she had, but instead of commenting on her hesitation, he reached out and took one of her hands. He tugged on it lightly. "Hey now, I promised *them* I would have you home early enough. He's going to murder me if he finds out I kept you out later than need be."

Had she been able to use both hands, she would have broken down and cried. So she used the hand that wasn't firmly locked with his to rub at her face before she steeled herself with a nod. "R-Right."

Ren stayed by her side, holding her hand with the occasional squeeze to let her know he was there. They met with Ryuji where he said he would be, and Makoto was very impressed by the blond teen's vigor when he saw them approaching.

"Let's go, man! We gotta help as soon as possible!"

How much did Ren actually tell him about the situation? Ryuji seemed desperate to get to Mementos, but did he know they would be fighting her dad, or did he think they would be fighting some random person? She greatly missed the comfort of Ren's hand, but in the presence of another person, she was too afraid to ask to hold onto him again.

"Calm down." Ren had a way of keeping the group collected no matter what situation they were headed into. It was something Makoto admired about him; being able to adjust to any circumstance

and know how to talk to anyone about anything at any time. It must have been why the gods had chosen him to wield his unique power.

Ryuji, however, was far too riled up to *calm down* . “Uh-uh. No way. I need to throw my fist into someone’s effin’ face!”

Ren did something uncharacteristic and grabbed Ryuji by his wrist and forced him to turn around. “You need to keep a level head. We’re not about to charge into Mementos and fight just anyone.”

She knew then that Ren had *not* told Ryuji *what* they were doing. However, in his silence, she worried he was afraid to say anything to offend her. But they needed to do this. And she would rather Ryuji be aware before he chose not to fight when they needed him to. “We’ll be going up against…Sanada himself.”

Ryuji’s eyes widened, but then he threw his head back and laughed. “Aha, okay, yeah, ya got me. For serious, whose ass we kickin’? I’m ready!”

She noticed Ren’s grip got tighter on his friend’s arm. “We *are* serious.”

Morgana added, “And you need to decide now if you’re going to help us or not.”

Ryuji scanned over all three of them, so Makoto took the initiative to speak to him. “I know you’re close to him and you don’t want to hurt him. But…” Her hands clenched at her sides. “This is the only way to protect him. He’s done so much for me, and I think for you, so we can at least do this one thing for him or he’s going to…to…to die.”

The silence settled around them and she wanted to go back to the train and lean into Ren so she wasn’t *shaking* because she was *afraid* .

“Well, then,” Ryuji finally said to break the tension. His demeanor was much more composed than it had been, but Makoto could see the determination in his eyes. He even offered her a half-smile. “We gotta go help him.”

Makoto would never tell Ren or Morgana (or Ryuji) how much she

hated the trip into Mementos, but this one hit her harder than the others combined. She knew what was waiting for her on the other side. All of her fears, her regrets, her failures hit her harder in the stomach than a well-aimed strike from a shadow. It caused her to double over in pain once she found her footing.

“Are you okay?”

It was Morgana’s voice, but she felt a hand on her shoulder that she was growing used to feeling. She straightened her back and tried to swallow the bile that came to the back of her throat. “I-I’m okay…”

“Let’s take it easy.” Even in his Joker outfit, Ren still had that concerned edge to his voice. “If you’re not feeling well, I don’t want you to push yourself.”

But she was Queen now. She was strong. The others looked up to her for her strength and wisdom. She couldn’t start losing that respect now. “I’ll be alright.” She was surprised her voice wasn’t as shaky as she had thought it would be. The smile she saw from beneath Ren’s mask made her feel more confident.

“We’re going to do this together, all four of us. Remember that.”

Ryuji was the first to throw himself into the transformed Morgana, but Ren held up a hand to her before she could position herself in her usual seat behind the wheel. “No, let me.”

For a second, she was offended, but then she told herself it was probably for the best for someone with a clear mind to steer clear of enemies. “Thank you.”

It hadn’t been what she wanted to say, but Ren smiled at her, nonetheless. “You can sit next to me, if you’d like.”

There was Joker, with his cocky half grin and arrogance in his tone. Makoto couldn’t help but walk around him with a slight huff of irritation, which only amused Ren more.

But as they drove through the darkened halls, Makoto’s mind began to wander again. All she wanted to think about were the times that her family was *happy* . Her birthdays. Her sister’s birthdays. The day

she was really sick and her dad came home early with her first Buchimaru toy…

Why was it easier to remember the fights, the anger, the bitterness than the small moments that kept them together?

“We’re getting closer, I think…”

There was a weight on her arm, and she didn’t need to look up to know that Ren was trying to comfort her. She appreciated the gesture.

After a few more staircases and prompts from Morgana, she heard him say, “He’s on this floor. Let’s find him.”

Behind her, she heard Ryuji smack his fist into his palm. “Let’s do this.”

If you don’t fight, he’s going to die .

Next to her, Ren hummed in acknowledgement. His grip on her arm tightened.

If you don’t fight, he’s going to die.

Makoto lifted a shaky hand to wipe at her eyes beneath her mask. She was going to be sick. She thought she was going to throw up when Morgana lunged into the familiar red and black pulsating field of energy.

Breathe.

Ryuji was the first one out of the van. It took several seconds for Makoto to realize that Ren was trying to speak to her. “We have to do this, Makoto. He needs your help.”

“I-I…”

I can’t…

“Makoto.”

She bit her lip to keep it from trembling. Her hands tightened into fists to keep them from shaking. “I can’t…”

He scooted closer to her. “You will, because if you don’t, we won’t be able to help him.”

“But…I’m scared…”

He grabbed the side of her face and held her with both hands. He used his thumbs to push her mask up so he could look directly into her eyes. “This is the only way we can help him.” She tried to shake him off, but his grip was strong. “You have to be strong, Makoto. For him, your mom, and for yourself. You have to fight.”

There was a spark in his eyes that caught her attention. Ren didn’t need to be here; he *chose* to be here. Ryuji did the same. This wasn’t just *her* battle anymore. She had friends. She wasn’t alone. Her dad *needed* her to see this through. And that had been what that spark had been.

She wondered if he saw the change in her eyes, too. She could tell he did when he grinned at her. He said nothing else to her, but he didn’t have to. She took one last inhale before she pushed herself out of the vehicle and Morgana *poofed* back into his normal form.

“We’re here for you, Queen.” She did her best to smile at Morgana. “So let’s take care of this and get you back to your family!”

However, the first sight they saw was not something she expected to see.

All of the Mementos missions once they had come to this point involved speaking to a shadow version of the human they were searching for. But the thing that stood before them was *not* a human.

“Dude, is that Sanada’s shadow?!”

“Be careful.” Morgana readied his weapon. Makoto’s heart sank back into her stomach. “I sense enormous power from that.”

Ren was the first to approach the figure, but once he got close

enough, it moved. The sword in its right hand lifted towards the sky; the orb in its left hand hovered in the space above it.

“Joker, look out!”

A giant flash filled the space they were in, followed by the horrifying *crash* of thunder. Makoto crouched down to cover her ears like she was a child and hiding from a storm.

But she knew one thing; she had seen this power before.

It was her dad’s persona.

“Oh shit!” Ryuji jumped back several meters. Ren was by her side a moment later.

“Are you hurt?”

She wanted to throw her arms around him and bury herself in his chest where she was starting to feel like she could be safe. But she had told Ren (through a mental sort of communication) that she would *fight* , not *cower* like a child who had a fear of lightning and thunder.

“I-I’m okay…”

If you don’t fight, he’s going to die .

Makoto was happy, to some extent, that Ryuji was willing to be the one to charge into the fight. “Sanada! Where are you?!”

The persona charged up another attack, but while they were ready this time around, Makoto couldn’t understand why they weren’t fighting her dad. Where was he? Did they have to beat this giant swordsman before they could fight him?

Was this her dad’s defense against the guy with the black mask?

“You shouldn’t be here.”

The voice was hard to recognize, but it hadn’t been from Ren or Ryuji or Morgana, so Makoto could only assume *who* it had come

from. She expected her dad to come out from the shadows or from behind the giant pillar of a persona, but he did neither.

Ren sensed her nervousness through her tensing muscles and took on the task of calling out. “Sanada?” He tried to take a few steps forward, but when he was in the invisible range of an attack, the persona readied another strike.

“Sanada! Dude, we’re here to help you man!”

Both Ren and Ryuji managed to avoid the lightning blast that struck the ground. Ryuji turned to Morgana with a grumble. “How the hell are we supposed to get any closer?”

Morgana lifted his blade. “We have no choice.”

“N-No!” Makoto realized too late that she had spoken out loud. The air around her grew cold. Her stomach hurt. Why couldn’t there be another way? She didn’t think she could offer much help against a thing that not only served as protection for her dad, but used attacks she had been terrified of for the majority of her life.

“If you have another idea, we would love to hear it.”

Morgana’s comment ripped right through her soul. Makoto looked back up at the face of the materialized spirit that had been with her dad most of his life, but she knew Morgana was right. She didn’t have any other ideas. Even with an unusual case such as this one, they needed to *fight* to bring about change.

She pulled herself together. She had wasted valuable time drowning in her doubts when she could have ended this minutes ago. “Most enemies who specialize in electric attacks are weak to wind.” Makoto turned to Morgana, who broke out into a confident smile. “If we stay a certain distance away, we should be able to bring the fight to him.”

“There she is!” Ryuji chimed in, holding up a thumbs-up. “Ain’t no way we’re gonna lose now!”

The half-smile she earned from Ren made her insides burn. “L-Let’s end this as soon as we can.”

Morgana took his cue and called forth Zorro, but Makoto and the others were very surprised when his attack did little to no damage to her dad's persona. "What?"

They were all expecting it to retaliate, but it stood completely still. But then the voice filled the silence. "I'm tired of fighting."

And that was when she saw him.

Her dad stood several meters behind his persona in the shadows, but the sudden burst of light made him visible. He looked almost normal, just very tired and very defeated, if his posture and his voice had been any indicator. Her dad's head was tilted down, so even if she tried to shout at him, he wouldn't have noticed her…right? Would his shadow recognize her?

Makoto had to reach out to him somehow, but she didn't make it too far before something latched onto her hand. "No. You get any closer and that thing is going to strike you down."

Ren. "But…he's my dad. I have to help him."

Morgana rushed up to them. "We have to beat his defense right now. I doubt Skull's attacks will do any damage, so it's between the two of you. But be ready, because we've never encountered this situation before. His shadow could very well join the fight."

She doubted that, since her dad didn't seem like he wanted to as he stood behind his persona in the darkness.

Ryuji still tried to call out to him. "Sanada! We just wanna help! Tell your persona to stop fightin' us!"

"I hate you!"

All four of them jumped back at the screech that reached their ears. It happened again, several more times, before Makoto noticed her dad lean forward and hold his hands to his head.

Everything made more sense when another voice filled the hall. *"I don't want to be your little girl! I don't want to be your little girl!"*

Makoto shook her head until she heard her brain smack against the inside of her skull. There were other phrases tossed around, all of them being said at one point in time, but none of them *good* . While she was fully aware of the damage Sae had done to him, Makoto didn't think that her own words had hurt him as badly as they apparently had.

He still remembered the time *she* told him she hated him, the time that she purposely called him *Sanada* when he had cornered her about stalking Ren, and even more recently, when she told him she would rather be *dead* than deal with him trying to hide behind his lies again.

All he had ever wanted was for them to be safe so they could *live* and enjoy each other without fearing *death* . And all it brought him was immense heartache and suffering, from her, her sister, and himself.

Suddenly, there was another voice, but in the form of an evil laugh. It eventually stopped laughing and repeated another phrase she had heard in a variety of forms.

"I'm going to leave you."

A moment later, Makoto watched in horror as a sword-like object pierced right through her father's chest. There was blood on his clothes, his mouth, the weapon that stuck out of him. But he didn't fall over or even appear to be in as much pain as he *should* have been in.

As soon as she was able to clear the dulling ache in her heart, the spear retracted and her mother's voice was much calmer, appearing to literally heal the wound it had created. *"I love you, Aki."*

Until the cycle repeated itself; from her sister's harsh words, to the words she had said, to her mother's threats to leave him…

What was happening?

A bolt of lightning struck ahead of her, but as dazed as she was, the thunder that followed didn't bother her at all. But it didn't come from

the person in front of them, but rather, from Ryuji.

“Get the hell out of our way!”

Captain Kidd rocked with life behind the blond, and Makoto suddenly felt her crushing guilt hit her square in the chest again. Ryuji wasn’t Sanada’s child; *she* was. But Ryuji was the one who was willing to fight, despite the odds and his lack of effective skills, because he knew he *had* to.

“I’m tired of fighting…”

Let me fight for you, Dad.

Ryuji unleashed another attack, this time physical rather than electric, and Makoto steeled herself to do the same. She had to dig a bit further into her heart to bring out Johanna, but when she did, everything was more clear. She was more determined to stop letting her father believe that everyone *hated* him.

When was the last time she told him she loved him?

When was the last time she went to the gym with him?

When was the last time she spent *time* with him that didn’t involve an argument?

That was all going to change.

Her resolution hit a snag when her nuclear attack didn’t faze their enemy and the giant guardian turned its frame to her. Its face was passive, so she had no idea how to read if anything was working, but she knew she was going to keep trying. She had to. She couldn’t bear to watch her dad’s shadow suffer any longer.

But if she charged right at her dad, would his persona attack her first? Would one lightning attack be enough to render her useless? Even if she asked Ren and Ryuji and Morgana to serve as a distraction?

“Jack Frost.”

The small blue capped demonic snowman blasted the much larger persona with a shot of ice. Makoto had no idea if it even worked, but her dad let out a cry of pain that tore through her heart. Ren looked over at her with eyes filled with regret, but Makoto shook her head.

“I think that’s its weakness. Please…” she said with a quieter voice. “Please distract it. I have to get through to my dad.”

“You don’t have to go alone.”

Makoto offered him the best smile she could. “I do, but I know you’re going to be behind me.”

She caught the look he gave her, a mix between understanding and pity, before she reached for her mask to bring out Johanna again.

I’m going to save you.

But even with the combined strategy of Ren’s ice attacks, Ryuji’s powerful physical beatdowns, and Morgana’s healing and support, when Makoto entered that range of attack, she worried Johanna wouldn’t get her to where she needed to be before the lightning took her out. The persona turned and followed her with its body as she passed it, and she suddenly regretted her plan of attack when the earthen sphere in its left hand rose in the air.

“Don’t, Caesar.”

And just like that, it stopped. A second later, it was hit with another Bufula. Makoto didn’t make light of the distraction and pushed Johanna closer to her destination.

The blood on the center of her dad’s chest caught her off guard for half a second. Then the voices picked up around her and she heard *enough* . “Stop listening to them.”

She felt her heart crack when he lifted his head, but the man who stood before her looked *nothing* like her dad. He looked like he was *dead* , more tired than she had ever seen him, and she realized this is what would happen to him once he threw in the towel and gave up.

If her mother wouldn't have told her about the black masked guy, Makoto may never have come here. The thought alone terrified her just as much as the shell of her father standing in front of her. "Stop listening to them."

"I'm tired of it."

She hopped off Johanna, knowing she was a safe distance away from an attack, trying to keep her voice from cracking. "But you always keep fighting."

"I don't want to anymore."

He lowered his face as the taunting continued around them. Makoto had no idea where they were coming from, but that didn't matter. The longer they shouted their hatred and insults, the more and more her dad seemed to withdraw from everything. If he continued to fade away, would his shadow disappear? Or would that mean *he* would disappear like someone had killed him in the Metaverse?

She wouldn't let that happen. So, she did the only thing she could think of, lifted her fist, and threw a punch to the side of his jaw.

He took it just as well as the first time she struck him. Until he turned back to face her. There was something in his eyes that *terrified* her.

"I'm tired of fighting for people who don't love me."

Even with his supposed lack of energy and unwillingness to fight, his left fist connected with the middle of her stomach and the air in her lungs came out in a painful cry. She didn't have a second to catch her breath or adjust to her dad's newfound rage before his other fist nailed her in the jaw.

"Caesar!"

"Queen!"

Her ears were ringing. Her jaw was numb. The world was spinning. But in a flash, her strength came back to her like nothing had ever happened. It took her a second or two to realize Morgana had cast a healing spell on her, which she was grateful for, because she barely

had enough time to jump a comfortable distance away before the lightning bolt pierced the air where she had been standing.

Well, this was a fight she not only needed to win, but one she needed to *prove* her strength in.

She was strong enough to take care of herself.

She was strong enough to take care of her friends.

She was strong enough to take care of her family.

She would defeat her dad, because that was the only way to save him.

"Johanna!"

Makoto wrapped her hands around the handlebars of her persona, twisted her wrists, then glared at the pitiful version of her father. "I'm going to defeat you, right now!"

His eyes narrowed at her. *"Caesar!"*

She didn't give him any time to mentally communicate with his persona and charged at him. Ren and Ryuji aided in her charge by keeping Caesar distracted with ice and physical attacks, and she was thankful for that. That little bit of time offered Makoto the perfect window to jump from Johanna and smash her fist into her dad's face again.

But he was quick to fight back. Makoto would forever be grateful for her aikido training or his fist would have connected her jaw. She could *feel* the strength behind his hook as it narrowly grazed the side of her head. With her momentum shifted to her legs, she swung her opposite leg to his chin, but he lifted an arm to block her strike.

Again, she took a moment to mentally thank Ren and Ryuji for occupying Caesar or she would have been shot down in a matter of seconds.

But she had no time to be distracted herself. She knew how ferocious her father could be, and if she didn't read his movements

right *once* , she would regret it. He was an upper body fighter, so she hoped that one of her kicks would land when he least expected it.

It was hard. He was far stronger than she had given him credit for. With each hook, jab, and punch he delivered, there was a force behind it that served as its own attack. One blast of air almost knocked her off her feet. His attacks were unrelentless. They were quick. Powerful. She was quickly losing her ground.

She found a small opening when he threw his left hand at her shoulder, so she ducked under it and sent her foot into his chest. It knocked him back a meter or two, which was all the space and time she needed to ready her next move.

One leg swung up to hit his jaw. Her next followed suit. Once she planted her foot behind her, she lunged at him and punched him under his ribs. Then she twisted her body and sent her left elbow into the same spot. She heard him groan behind her, which was wonderful (and terrifying at the same time), but she couldn't stop.

She placed a foot behind one of his and pulled it out from under him, causing him to lose his balance for a second. It was the second she needed to rear back and slam her fist into the side of his face, knocking him over completely. She landed on top of his chest, pummeling him over and over until her hands hurt and she felt tears coming back to her eyes.

"I don't hate you! I never have! You're the one who keeps hating yourself!"

She struck him again, albeit much weaker than before. "Please, Dad. Please snap out of this!"

She felt herself losing strength and her hands fell to the space over his shoulders. Her head landed on his chest. "I need you to fight. I'm going to fight with you. And if you give up, then I'm going to stop, too."

There was complete silence in a world that should never have been silent. Makoto couldn't tell if it was actually quiet or if her brain had

tuned out what was happening around her. Then, she felt something on her back, pushing her down and tightening around her.

“You’ve always been stronger than me, Makoto.”

Makoto blinked. Was that her dad? Were those his arms around her? Was he back to normal? Or was he going to suffocate her with her guard down? She twisted her head so she could look for the others, and to her surprise, the giant persona had disappeared and her friends stood several meters away, appearing just as confused as she was.

She managed to lift her head enough to look down at her dad. For as many times as she hit him, she was happy he wasn’t covered in as much blood as she thought he would be. “A-Are you okay?”

There was a small smirk on his face and she couldn’t contain her tears. “I’ve done so much damage to this family…”

Makoto shook her head as she wiped at her eyes beneath her mask. “I’m sorry I let you down. I couldn’t help you because I wasn’t strong enough like you needed me to be. But I hope I am now.”

“I wish I could be half as strong as you thought I was.”

Her arms wrapped around his neck. “I’m going to be that strength for you now, Dad. You don’t have to fight this alone anymore.”

He gave her a weak nod before his hands fell from her back and to the ground beside her. Makoto sat up in a panic, worried that maybe she had hurt him more than she intended, but he still smiled at her.

“Thank you, Makoto.”

It was the same ending to every other person they had defeated in Mementos, but Makoto was oddly more calm, more determined, more confident than she had ever been before. It was an odd feeling, considering she thought she would feel heartbroken for hurting her dad, but it rejuvenated her spirit.

She had saved her dad, just like she said she would, and now she hoped he *knew* she could support him.

A hand landed on her shoulder once she stood up. “You’re strong, Makoto.”

She smiled and felt her face warm a little. “T-Thank you.”

Ren released her and said nothing more to her, but she heard the *swish* of his coattails as he spun around. Makoto took a second to catch her breath, her hands clutching over her heart.

I’ll be the one to protect you this time, Dad.

And now she had the strength to believe it.

Chapter 71

Chapter 71

Ren was a mix of feelings that morning when he woke up.

One: he was tired. He had a fitful sleep, worried that they had not done what they needed to help Sanada and the guy with the black mask went back into the Metaverse and killed him.

Two: he was happy. He was able to walk Makoto back home last night and she had a certain bounce in her step that warmed his heart. She wasn't smiling like she had just been named smartest and strongest (and cutest) person in the world, but she was proud. Ren hadn't been able to see much of the physical fight between Makoto and Sanada, but he knew who came out on top, on her own, and she had every right to be proud of herself.

Three: he was nervous. He hadn't gone inside her apartment complex, worried he had brought her home too late and he also needed to get home himself. So, he didn't know how everything played out on her end. Should he text her and find out, or should he wait until everyone gathered for their celebration sushi dinner and ask her then?

Four: he was tired. Tired enough that he put it on his list of feelings twice…

"Good morning, Ren!"

Morgana's unusually chipper attitude brought his eyes the rest of the way open. "Hmm…" He was really tired…

Morgana's paws landed on his shoulder. "Wake up, Ren! I want some sushi!"

Ren grumbled loudly. "It's not even nine in the morning. We're going to go later…"

“You’re really tired, huh?”

He didn’t really need too much sleep, but that fight last night took more out of him than he thought. Not that he fought much, but it oddly required more focus than any other shadow they had taken care of before. There were many fine lines he didn’t want to cross; he wanted to be respectful of Ryuji and Makoto’s relationship with Sanada, but he also needed to protect them and look out for them. Thankfully, Ryuji had been eager to help no matter what the cost (to an extent of course) and Makoto had taken it upon herself to prove her strength to her father.

He wanted to help her, he really did, but he was afraid that the matter needed to be settled personally, so he stood back in the distance in case she needed him.

Most of his exhaustion up until yesterday’s fight had been mental, but last night’s experience was the final crack. Ren had been on eggshells the entire time he had been in Tokyo, and he finally had time to catch up on his sleep. He would only need one day, and since Sojiro didn’t ask him to help with the store, none of his friends had asked him to hang out, he took the chance that he had.

Morgana, however, was willing to push his luck. “You should ask Makoto if everything worked out okay!”

Hearing the suggestion from Morgana, Ren was more inclined to actually ask. He nodded his head once and grabbed his phone sitting by his head. His fingers worked fast against the screen, but he paused before he sent it.

“What’s wrong?” Morgana asked, sensing his hesitation.

Ren dropped the phone to his chest. “I just don’t want to come across as too pushy or nosy.”

“I’m sure Makoto would understand.” Morgana then stood on all fours. “It would be nice to know, just because it was an odd case. Every shadow we’ve fought has worked alone and couldn’t summon a persona. And while Makoto is kind of caught up on what we know about Medjed, we still don’t know as much as we need to know

about why she took that other group into the Metaverse."

He sat himself up in the bed, holding his phone in his right hand, but he sighed and sent the message. "Sanada said something about Makoto's sister having a palace. Could she have been the one Makoto was talking about a while back, who wanted to arrest him for his hand in the Phantom Thieves drama?"

The cat's eyes widened and his tail wagged happily behind him. "That might be. If she's feeling up for it, you should ask to meet her so we can talk about this. We can help her once we figure out Alibaba and what's happening with Medjed."

Ren felt like they were crossing a line into Makoto's personal space, but in his defense, she *had* kind of betrayed the team. Thankfully, he could understand her crisis and she at least took supposed persona users with her. How far had they gotten? How many went? Had Amada gone with them and that was why he was able to understand Morgana?

"It would be nice, yes," he started, his eyes never leaving his phone. "But I want to give her some more time. If she's feeling up to talking about it, then sure, I'll listen. But what happened last night was something I'm assuming she's still recovering from. Even if she did well and Sanada is okay, I want her to come to *us* and talk."

Morgana didn't like his answer, but he turned and hopped off his bed with a subtle grunt. "Alright. But we're going to need her help with figuring out Alibaba. She's way too valuable as a teammate to lose her because of something she's hiding from us."

Ren rubbed at his eyes, suddenly wishing he had his morning cup of coffee before he started the conversation. "I need some caffeine, then we can talk more on this, alright?"

The cat seemed to agree with him and Ren threw on something that wouldn't make him look like a sluggish, trashy looking kid who was in need of a fix in front of Sojiro's customers. But as he made his way down the stairs, he heard that angry and hostile tone in Sojiro's voice and knew something was happening.

It woke him right up (and he almost missed one of the stairs…) and he tried to act calm and collected as he stepped into the café proper. Sojiro had his hand pressed down on the countertop in front of a woman he had seen only once before.

“You can’t threaten to take my daughter away from me!”

The woman scoffed at Sojiro. “Perhaps you should take better care of the child then.” The second her eyes turned to him, Ren’s back straightened and he held his breath. “Ren Amamiya, a criminal. I’m sure that won’t do you any good in a custody hearing.”

Sojiro’s hand smacked against the wood again. “How dare you use a child as a means to get your damn information!”

She chuckled at him, but her eyes narrowed at Ren. “You were one of those who charged into Kaneshiro’s club, yes?”

His heart sank in his chest, but he didn’t know *why* . She was cold to him, the tone in her voice sharp and cutting, but why was she bringing up Kaneshiro? Who *was* this woman? “D-Do I know you?”

She took two quick strides and grabbed him by his collar. He felt like a terrified child under her glare. “You tell me what happened that day or I’ll see to it that you’re thrown in a cell next to Sanada for the rest of your life!”

Ren braved making a confused face. “Um, what?”

“You let him go right now!”

If anything, the woman’s grip got tighter. “What did he do? Did he work with those damn Phantom Thieves to trigger a change of heart? You better say something if you don’t want me to throw you in prison for evading questioning!”

She was so angry…

“…You’re Makoto’s sister…”

Ren thought they were related back when they first met, but it hit him now just who she was. She didn’t want the *truth* ; she wanted

whatever information she could to twist into what she wanted to hear. And if she was indeed Makoto's sister, she wanted Sanada's head over something that he hadn't even done wrong. Granted Ren could better understand why she was so *angry* with him, but still…it was all very extreme and unnecessary.

She threw him back and he had to catch himself by grabbing onto a nearby booth. Her eyes narrowed even further at him, then she pointed a finger in his face. "Don't you *ever* say her name like you *know* her."

For someone who was so bitter and pissed with one family member, it was quite a surprise to see some level of protection for another. Before Ren could comment on it (he wasn't really going to), she turned back on her heels and made her way to the door. Before she left, she looked over her shoulder to Sojiro.

"When I come back next time, I'll have an officer with me and we will extract your daughter from your custody. I would advise you to tell me what I need to know if you want to keep her in your care."

She left the next second, and Ren's mind was spinning. He just met Makoto's sister, who had it out for their father, and now had it out for Sojiro? Why? Ren may not know much about Sojiro's past, but he never would have thought that the elder man would get into any kind of trouble that would involve someone revoking custody of his…

"You have a daughter?"

Sojiro pointed a finger at him this time. "You keep your mouth shut around her, you understand? And you keep out of my business!"

Sojiro threw on his fedora and grabbed his cigarettes before walking around the bar to where he stood, pushed him out of the way with his shoulder, and walked out the door, flipping the sign around (for once) before he was out of sight.

Ren stared after him, wondering what the hell had just happened, when Morgana jumped into the booth he was still leaning on. "Do you think Futaba Sakura is his daughter? The same one that the calling card asked us to change?"

It was known for a few days *who* they had been asked to change, and while Ren suspected a type of relationship between this Futaba and Sojiro, he would never have expected it to be his *daughter* .

“There could be a hundred Futaba Sakura’s living in this city,” he told Morgana. “We can discuss it more as a team tonight when we meet back up.”

However, Ren found himself in a bit of a predicament a few minutes later. He needed caffeine or he wasn’t going to make it. He had no idea how to operate the coffee siphon, had no idea how Sojiro made the coffee he solely brewed for him…Plus, it would be rude to use things that did not belong to him.

He made his way back up the stairs to change into something more “outdoor” appropriate so he could run and get his required dosage of caffeine. He paused before digging through his things to check his phone and saw an unread message from Makoto. He held his phone tightly in his hands, hoping that she would tell him everything went well and they had succeeded and her dad wasn’t dead now that she had told him he *wasn’t* .

He’s much better today. Mom said everything was fine and he went to work this morning.

Thank you.

The simple message had Ren falling down onto his bed. Makoto would have told him (or not responded at all) if something *bad* had happened, so it did wonders for his muscles and his lungs and his heart. He may not even need that coffee anymore.

He changed anyway, typing out a quick reply to Makoto to tell her he was happy for them. He took another ten minutes to debate about asking her to go out with him to get a light breakfast or something just so he could actually tell from her body language that everything was okay.

Makoto did say Sanada went to work that morning, so would it be okay to ask her to hang out? Was he being too clingy after the atypical events of the night before? Sometimes he wished he could

be as confident and unrestrained as he was when he was in the Metaverse.

With that thought in his head, he typed out, *I need some caffeine. You want to join me? :)* He gripped his phone again while he stared at his message conversation, but a minute later, he saw the bubbles, indicating she was typing something back.

Another few minutes later, the reply actually came. *Okay.*

He looked at her one word message, then laughed to himself. How did a few minutes go by with her trying to mash words together come out as a simple *okay?* He would have loved to have asked her out in person, since her delayed response was probably due to her being flustered and unable to find the right words.

She might be too cute for him.

Ren offered to wait for Makoto at Shibuya Station, and he didn't have to wait too long. As she approached where he stood by the exit, he tried to tone down his grin. She really was too cute for him.

"Good morning, my Queen."

Her face instantly flushed and she frowned as she looked away. Ren's grin stretched over his face. "S-Stop that…"

He held out a hand to her with a light bow and placed the other arm behind his back. "You've distanced a long way to spend time with me. I consider it an honor."

When he blinked, Makoto's face went from a light pink to a dark red. She turned her head in an effort to hide it from him. "S-So…um…w-where are w-we…um, going?"

He could look at her face all day long, red, pink, normal; she was always beautiful. "I figured we could do something light, maybe the café? Sojiro kind of dipped on me this morning and I'm ashamed to admit I'm not comfortable making my own coffee yet."

Makoto nodded her head once, then slowly reached out to take his hand. "Thank you again for your help last night."

He paused for a second, worried that the change in subjects would be too heavy for her first thing in the morning, but she held his gaze and her eyes were bright and sincere and *beautiful* …

“Uh…”

Now it was Makoto’s turn to chuckle at him. “Let’s be off.”

Ren released his breath as he felt the heat take over his face. He had never once stumbled over his words and then fail to say something. But one look into her eyes was all it took to kill the last working brain cell. He didn’t mind. So long as she held his hand and carried herself the way she was currently doing, he wouldn’t mind being a stuttering fool for the rest of his life.

Once they were seated across from each other with drinks in front of them, Ren struggled to find something to talk about. He wanted to ask her what had happened the previous night after she got home, but it wasn’t really his business. He wanted to ask her about her sister, if he had met her that morning and why she would be threatening to take away Sojiro’s daughter. He wanted to ask about her sister’s palace, why Makoto had taken it upon herself to show others how to get inside, and how far they had made it.

“I know you have a lot of questions for me.” His eyes lifted from his cup of coffee, but Makoto’s were lowered to her own drink. There was a remorseful expression painting her face, and Ren wanted more than anything to see a smile.

“You can tell me whenever you’re ready. I promise.”

But she shook her head. “It’s not fair to you. Please,” she whispered as she brought her eyes up to meet his. She was still brimming with determination, but she also seemed ready to come clean with him. “Ask me whatever you want.”

Ren relaxed into the seatback. “Your sister,” he started, carefully noting how Makoto flinched mentioning her. “I think I met her this morning.”

Makoto’s eyes widened in surprise and a hand covered her mouth.

“W-What?”

“Assuming it was her, of course.” He leaned forward in his seat and placed his elbows on the table. “I met her once before in passing, and she told me she knew someone who went to school with me, but I didn’t ask, and she didn’t tell.”

Her expression remained unchanged. “B-But why would she be…” Some sense of realization came to her face and her eyes cleared up immediately. “She spoke to you about Kaneshiro?”

Ren lowered his head and stared down at the dark liquid in his cup. “Yeah, she did. But that’s not why she was there.” He looked back up at her. “She’s threatening to take Sojiro’s daughter away from him.”

He came off more cold in his tone than he thought and it clearly showed on her face. So before she could hide her hands to handle the news, he reached across the table quickly and latched on to one of them. “I didn’t mean to sound so callous. I just…don’t understand. Sojiro’s a good guy…I think.”

She sighed heavily, but she didn’t fight against his hold. “I don’t understand why she would be doing that.”

“Well,” Ren continued. “Alibaba dropped off a calling card and asked us to change the heart of a Futaba Sakura. Do you think she could be Sojiro’s daughter, and maybe who your sister is going after?”

Makoto appeared deep in thought, but so confused at the same time. She didn’t stay quiet for long. “Sakura-san has never spoken of a daughter, has he? But Sis wouldn’t be harassing him just to speak to his daughter. She would have gone right to the source.” A hand rested under her chin. “I could try and ask my father, because he might know more about it than I do. But…I guess this explains why Sakura-san wasn’t overly thrilled to have me over.”

He squeezed her hand. “You’re not your sister, Makoto. Even if you both can be pretty scary sometimes.” He laughed softly to himself. “It seems you take after your dad. He’s pretty scary, too.”

Ren noticed her trying to say something, so he changed the subject. “We can talk to Sojiro after our dinner tonight, if that’s okay. He does leave the shop early sometimes and he has a smile on his face when he’s on the phone with a girl, presumably, but…” He ran a hand through his hair, trying to contain his burning blush. “I’m not really that good at differentiating between familial relationships and romantic ones.”

That earned him a quick glare. “No, you’re not.”

It made him lean back in his seat after he released her hand. “Sorry.” He cleared his throat and thanked his lucky stars that Makoto’s glare disappeared. “I know where he lives, so maybe we can find something in his home.”

“You mentioned before that Alibaba would eliminate Medjed for us, correct?” She frowned in thought. “Why? Medjed hasn’t technically done anything besides start a commotion. How do we know if we can trust this stranger, and that they’re not doing this for a selfish purpose…”

Makoto’s frown changed into a pained expression, but Ren tried to offer her a small smile. “We will figure it out, hopefully tonight.” Her eyes landed on him while her head remained facing the table. He desperately wanted to hold her. “I might not understand why you took a group of people into the Metaverse behind our backs, but I don’t think it was selfish.”

“Why are you always so understanding?” He was taken back by the anger that flashed across her face. “Why aren’t you more upset with me? I betrayed your trust, the teams’ trust, and you can tell me it’s okay?”

Ren took a deep breath to steady his thoughts. “Makoto, I trust you. Yes, I’m slightly upset that you didn’t tell us about this back when you were asking questions, but you didn’t go alone. I also can’t imagine being in your position, but if you trust those other friends of yours, then I can try and trust them, too.”

“I almost went by myself, the next night…after the festival.” Ren’s heart dropped in his stomach for two different reasons. But he kept

quiet and let Makoto keep speaking. “My dad knew I was lying about where I was going and he drug me back home. He cornered me and asked about how I found out about Kaneshiro, and that sparked an argument between my parents and I…I asked him about his persona.”

She exhaled before she continued on. “Mitsuru had actually told me a while back that she sensed something about me. And she knew. And I think she knows about the rest of you as well. B-But I trust her!” Her hands flew in front of her face and there was a small hint of fear in her eyes. “A-And I d-didn’t name any names!”

He chuckled at her reaction. “It’s alright, Makoto.” Deep down, he wished she would have told him this when it had happened, but he tried to give her the benefit of the doubt. This Mitsuru lady hadn’t gone to the police; Sanada *was* the police and hadn’t gone after him; Amada could have spoken to the principal… “Go on.”

Makoto gave a quick nod. “I told my dad why I was out that night, and…he wanted me to take him the next chance I could. They don’t understand the way the Metaverse works. They fought in something different when they were in high school. Something called…the Dark Hour. But my dad and Mitsuru were able to fight, and I’m sure Ken would have been able to as well, but we didn’t last very long once we got inside…”

Ren waited for her to continue, but he noticed the way her arms moved against each other and her hands were under the table. “Is that when you got hurt?”

He prayed that she didn’t start crying. She looked like she wanted to. “I warned my dad about how Sis wouldn’t be the same person, but…I should have known better. It was my fault for taking him. So, yes…but had I not pushed him out of the way, that attack would have killed him.” She rotated her shoulder for emphasis. “It’s been fine for a few days. I think it was worth it.”

“I’d like to meet them, personally, one day,” he said quietly. “I don’t think there’s a reason for us to be doing all of this separately. We can all work together, or at least have each other as allies.”

Makoto paused for a moment, but she slowly came to agree with him. “I-I can ask Mitsuru. I’m sure she would like to speak to someone who has more information about these kinds of things.” She folded her arms over her stomach. “Assuming it’s okay with her. I don’t know how much of her secrets she wants to give out.”

“Fair enough.” Ren finished off his coffee and stretched out his back. “I know I said this before, but, I’m glad you’re telling me all of this.” He smiled at her. “I hope you keep depending on me as someone you can trust.”

Ah, the blush. It was probably his favorite thing to look at. “O-Oh, of course.” She bowed her head to him. “Thank you for being so understanding…and patient.”

Ren twisted his wrist to check the time. “Well, it’s still pretty early in the day. I’d hate to have to see you off after bonding like this.” A grin split his face in half when Makoto lowered her head even more and he could *feel* the heat from her cheeks. “Did you want to do something else?”

Makoto tossed the idea around in her head for a few minutes, and a few minutes more once the waitress handed him the bill for their drinks. She noticed *that* . “H-Hey! I can pay for my own.”

He waved the paper in his hand. “You owe me.”

“T-Then I should pay for yours.”

Ren laughed because his heart needed to breathe. “Oh, no, you misunderstand. This is a *date* , because I’m a good *boyfriend* and I pay for these little outings.”

Makoto’s hands shielded her face, but he didn’t need to see it to know what it looked like. She only grunted in frustration before Ren handed the young lady his money.

“C’mon, what do you want to do now?”

When she didn’t budge, Ren slid into the booth next to her, knocking his shoulder into hers and grinning like a mad man when she let out a surprised gasp. She turned to him with a blush so warm it set his

heart on fire. “U-Uh…um…”

“Let’s go to the arcade. It’s pretty cool inside there!”

He draped his arm over her shoulder and pulled her out of the booth, opting to lower his arm around her back rather than let go of her. She didn’t seem to mind.

“I-I guess the arcade w-will…um…help me broaden my horizons…”

And he would take her anywhere she wanted.

Chapter 72

Chapter 72

Just when he thought Makoto couldn't *possibly* get any cuter…

"Ahh! I was so close that time!"

Ren had to bite his tongue. Makoto held her own plastic gun tightly against her chest as she bounced on the balls of her feet. He never in a million years would have thought she would have been so *invested* in an arcade game, but she was. Her shouts and cries had been slightly off-putting, but, it was also the cutest thing in the world.

He watched as Makoto sighed heavily as the ending credits appeared on screen, signaling the end of their game. She had the most adorable pout on her face, then she carefully returned the gun back to its home.

"I guess I should probably start reading up on strategies and…w-what?"

Ren tried so hard not to laugh, but the second he noticed her cheeks turning pink, he couldn't contain it. "You really got into that game, huh?"

She stomped her foot. He was going to remember this day for the rest of his life. "Are you making fun of me?"

"I mean," he said as he rotated his body to the crowds of people turning back to their games. "You drew in quite a crowd."

Her face darkened just before she bowed her head. "I-I…I'm so sorry!"

"Why are you apologizing to me?" Seriously, this girl was the most precious person alive. How was she not with someone by now? Had she ever been? Why? Who would *not* want this level of cuteness as a part of their life?

The Makoto he knew and saw more of started to reemerge as she lifted her bag over her shoulder, but avoided making eye contact with anyone but the floor. “Um…I’ve never done this before, so I…I might have gotten carried away.”

Ren took a step closer to her. “Did you have fun at least?”

A brilliant smile flashed over her face. “I did. Thank you for coming with me.”

He settled for a simple, “You’re welcome,” because he couldn’t think straight enough to come up with something better.

Makoto didn’t seem to mind. “I hope we can do this again together some time.”

She took a few steps towards the exit, but Ren stood in his place, paralyzed. Did she really just say she wanted to do this *again* , *together?* Without one stutter or blush or…or…

“Ren?”

He shook his head at the sound of his name. Makoto gave him a confused look, but he smiled to keep her from asking why he had spaced out. “Sorry. We should probably head over to the station. It shouldn’t be too much longer before we need to meet for our dinner.”

And it was hard having to call an end to their unofficial date, but he tried to do little things so he’d always have the gift of her presence. He told himself with an inflating ego that Makoto was growing more comfortable with his arm around her back as they rode the train together. He didn’t have to nudge her to get her to lean against him, or stand closer to him. He really wanted to hold her hand as they exited the train, but baby steps.

He went as far as picking the seat next to her at the sushi bar, which did *not* go unnoticed by Ann. She gave him a look, but she thankfully didn’t comment on it. Not that Ren would know what to say to her if she asked him if they were “official” now…

Soon. Hopefully. Maybe…

For the most part, their early dinner was a mild affair. Except when Ryuji opened his mouth and mentioned “Phantom Thieves” at a volume that was picked up by the few others surrounding them, which led to the uncomfortable feeling Ren had the first time they went out for a celebration party. There were eyes on them, questioning who they really were, asking why *children* were out in a sophisticated place they clearly didn’t belong in.

Makoto had been the one to try and derail the attention, followed in suit by Ann, but no matter how hard he tried, Ren couldn’t stop a grin from spreading over his face. Suspicious or not, Makoto’s fluster was so apparent and all he wanted to do was laugh and throw an arm over her chair and tell her she was the most precious thing in the world.

They didn’t last much longer, thanks to the chatter around them, so the group left the restaurant and began to head back to the station. Ryuji kept on shouting ideas about who Futaba was and why Alibaba needed her to have the change of heart, but then he felt Makoto’s eyes on him and he couldn’t resist turning to her.

“It seems it’s quite common for boys to think a spouse is cheating on their significant other.”

When she cracked a playful smirk, Ren had to catch himself before he grabbed her wrist and pulled her into him and *kissed* her. As embarrassing as her words had been, the jest had done more to kill the blush and bring out a matching smirk.

Ren chose not to reply, worried his comeback would offend her, but as he scrambled for something to do to flip the tables back around, another voice spoke through the group.

“What a pleasant surprise.”

Akechi.

Ryuji was the first out of their team to speak to the teenage detective. “The hell you want?”

Akechi simply shrugged off Ryuji’s harsh tone with a smile. “Oh, you

all just caught me by surprise." Akechi's smile widened as his eyes turned to the girl standing beside him. "You have an interesting group of friends, Niijima-san."

There was an accusation in his tone, and the way he seemed confident made Ren angry. But, Makoto stepped up to where Akechi was still beaming and took control of the situation on her own.

"We've all become rather close, thanks to the damage left behind by Kamoshida. Ann met Yusuke some time later and introduced us to him." She spoke like *she* was in control; *she* was the one who was confident; *she* was the one with the upper hand. It knocked the air out of him…

It did nothing to Akechi's demeanor. "Shujin is lucky to have a student council president as attentive and kind as you are."

…Was Akechi *flirting* with her? He sure sounded like he was. And Ren couldn't have that. Not that he would ever be possessive, but Akechi was a questionable person. He had yet to understand how the other teen could hear Morgana during their school trip. (He thought he *knew* , just didn't know what that could mean.) He was always popping up and acting like he *knew* they were the Phantom Thieves, but tried to outsmart them into saying something since he didn't have physical proof. Yet.

"But I'm actually glad I ran into you all," Akechi started again, a more solemn expression coming to his face. "Did you hear about the threat Medjed has made? It has the people in an uproar." Then, his eyes narrowed, as if waiting to read their reactions. "A purge of Japan's infrastructure, in their words, if the Phantom Thieves don't turn themselves in."

Ren was thankful Ryuji had half a mind to keep his mouth shut, and he was also thankful that Makoto was quick to think and kept Akechi's attention on her. "That's quite a threat to make."

Akechi played along and nodded his head. "They will hack into mainframes and collect money from businesses, banks, political parties, everything they can." A hand rested against his chin. "But with this kind of power, it could prove fatal to the country. If they can

get into the power grid, Tokyo is finished. This is a much bigger threat than the public believes, even if they are stricken with terror enough as it is." He sighed. "I hope the Phantom Thieves stop seeking personal gain to avoid a chaotic meltdown of a fine nation."

Did Akechi know about Ren's ties to Alibaba? Was Alibaba actually going to help now that there was a threat made? *Was* there a threat made, or was Akechi just tossing out bait in an effort to catch them off balance?

But once again, Makoto took hold of the situation. "I'm sure that Medjed will be dealt with accordingly. The police have a group of hackers to solve cases like this." Her voice was steady and proud. Ren was proud of her. "I've told you that before, Akechi-kun."

Ah, a stab. Even though Ren had a hard time containing his laughter, he did. Akechi didn't take her comment all that well, and *that* had been wonderful to see.

Until… "Ah, of course, you're right." He shook his head, then added, "But while I have you here, Niijima-san, I'd like to ask you something." Akechi became more neutral, but also took one step closer to Makoto. Ren did, too. "Since you mentioned the police, I heard Sanada-san didn't make it into work the other day, which is highly unusual for him. Is he okay? I know the two of you are close."

Ren felt Morgana paw gently at his back from inside his bag, a typical, silent message to *relax* . Makoto had been doing a damn good job speaking with Akechi for the group, but now that he brought up her *father* , he doubted she would sound half as strong as she needed to be.

"Oh. This is the first I've heard of it." Ren blinked, trying to figure out if he had imagined Makoto's even tone or if she had actually said the words with as much ease as she had spoken with before. "Please don't get the wrong idea, Akechi-kun. Sanada and I worked together during the ordeal with Kamoshida, but I have had little contact with him since."

"Is that so?" Akechi looked over at Ren when he came to stand next to Makoto. Suddenly, the teen smiled like he hadn't just been trying

to cut Makoto down by mentioning someone she cared about because he was upset she had the strength to stand up to him. “Well, I guess I do work with the police too, but I was just curious to know if you had heard anything.”

Makoto added, “I would assume you would be the first of us to know.”

His smile unnerved Ren, but then the teen bowed to the group and gripped his briefcase. “Well, I’m sorry for troubling you with all my concerns. Have a wonderful evening, Niijima-san. Amamiya-kun. The rest of you.”

The silent bubble burst the second Akechi was out of sight. Ryuji and Ann whipped out their phones and spoke in a hushed panic. Yusuke hovered over the both of them. Ren glanced over at Makoto, whose eyes were closed as she took several breaths to steady herself.

“Are you okay?”

She nodded to him, then opened her eyes to meet his. “I wasn’t expecting any of this. We need to get to the bottom of what’s happening with Alibaba and Futaba. While it pains me to say it, Akechi is correct. If they can hack into the power grid-,”

He dropped a hand on her shoulder. “We can figure that out as a team. But…take this time to relax.” She was more tense than he thought she was. “You should have punched him in the face for bringing him up.”

Her lips turned up slightly and he grinned in response. “Oh, trust me, I wanted to, but that would have done more harm than good.”

Yeah, she was *really* cute when she spoke with a bite. “Probably not, but, it would have been entertaining to see.”

Makoto chuckled at him. “Maybe one day, I will.”

He hoped he saw that personally.

“Guys! What the hell are we gonna do?”

Ryuji, Ann, and Yusuke all looked at him. He felt Morgana wiggle around in his bag until he freed himself and pushed himself up on Ren's shoulders.

"We need to know who Alibaba is and why they want a change of heart for Futaba. Or, we can ask Boss ourselves."

To his surprise, Makoto was the one who shook her head at Morgana's suggestion. "I don't think it's wise to interfere with family affairs without permission."

"We'll just talk to him," Ren said quietly, trying to respect her recent decision to ask for *his* help in dealing with her own family affairs. "If he really doesn't want to answer our questions, then we can try a different approach."

Ann nodded in agreement. "Yeah. Boss has been good to us. We shouldn't stick our noses into something he doesn't want us to stick our noses into."

"Yeah, but guys," Ryuji interjected. "We only have like a few weeks to take care of Medjed. We ain't gonna be able to do that on our own!"

"We should speak to Boss immediately, then work on our strategy in case he wishes not to speak to us."

Ryuji and Yusuke were correct. Their first step had to be talking with Sojiro. The rest could be discussed depending on the outcome.

So, Ren gave an affirmative nod of his head. "Alright. Let's head over and talk to him."

The train ride was done in a mix of silence and conversation. Ren was too deep in his own thoughts to pick up what everyone else had been talking about. Why was it hitting him *now* that they were going to speak to the man who gave him a roof over his head when no one else would? What if their curiosity angered him and Sojiro kicked him out, or worse, reported him to the police for the days he was technically out late? They needed answers, but he couldn't attack him like Makoto's sister had done. But if Sojiro didn't talk, what

would the team have to do?

“Y-You can, um…lean on me if-if you want to…”

He heard the words, but his heart *felt* them. Makoto refused to make eye contact with him, choosing to hide her blush from him as best she could. It took his mind another second to realize what she had been saying, but when he did, he exhaled a laugh and a smile split his face in two.

His arm looped around her back and pulled her into him, earning a surprised gasp from her. She was much warmer now; he could feel her blush through his shirt. “Thank you.” He laughed again as she tried to get comfortable in his hold. “But I won’t lean on you too much. I don’t want to hurt you.”

He felt her hand swat at his arm and his heart jumped into his throat. “I’m strong enough to support you, Ren. Or do I need to punch you to prove it?”

“Actually,” he whispered as he placed his chin on top of her head. “You already have hit me.”

“I’ll do it again if I need to.”

He didn’t doubt her, but a small part of him wanted her to. Because for some reason, a fired up Makoto fighting against him sounded hot…

Okay, he needed to focus and maybe once this situation was behind them, he could entertain a sparring match with her and get his ass handed to him, but end up being worth it if he could stare into her eyes as she hovered over him…

He praised the gods of good fortune that the train station approached them before Makoto began to question his silence. If she found him odd for the last few minutes of their ride, she never said anything about it. He *did* get another look from Ann, but she didn’t say anything either.

Focus, Ren .

He followed behind the others to make the transfer from Shibuya to Yongen-Jaya. In the process, Ren tried to come up with ways to talk to Sojiro about a sensitive subject (while trying not to think about the girl walking beside him). Coming out and asking him about Futaba was likely going to make Sojiro angry and not answer at all. Asking him if he had a daughter named Futaba would likely end the same way. But if they wanted answers, he was going to have to ask him at one point in the conversation.

To his dismay, Sojiro wasn't at the coffee shop when they arrived. The team looked to him for advice, but Ren didn't feel comfortable taking four people and a cat over to where Sojiro actually lived.

Ann pointed to the box of wrapped sushi in his hand. "We can bring him 'a gift'."

"B-B-But…Lady Ann!"

Ryuji slapped his fist into his palm. "Hell yeah! Let's go get some answers!"

But Ren held up his hands. "Guys, we need to be careful about this. I know we need help with Medjed, and if something *is* happening to Sojiro, I want to help him. But showing up at his house will only upset him. So, be ready. If he gets angry, we leave. Don't push him."

Everyone came to an agreement, but deep down, Ren still worried he was crossing a line into Sojiro's privacy. Granted he did the same with Makoto, but she was a little different. Sojiro was a stern and strict guy, so maybe he didn't want anyone to help him, if he needed it. Besides that, Sojiro also had the capability to have him *arrested* again. Sojiro had been warming up to him as of late, but how much of that would change if he poked and prodded a man who was at his breaking point?

Would Makoto be willing to talk to her sister about the issue? Would Sanada know anything? Who else would know how to get answers if Sojiro didn't provide them, or told them he knew nothing about a Futaba Sakura?

"The door is open."

Ren didn't even register that he had led them to the front door of Sojiro's house until Morgana jumped onto the gate. "With a little bit of stealth, I can open this guy right up, and…"

The lock *clicked* and the gate swung open, but Ren refused to move. "Isn't this a violation of some kind?" he heard Ann ask behind him. "I don't feel comfortable with this."

"We can ask about his well-being," came Makoto's response. He certainly hadn't been expecting her to be so gung-ho about the breaking and entering aspect. "If the door is open, we need to make sure he's-,"

There was a small crack of thunder in the distance. Makoto tensed next to him, but before Ren had a chance to ask her if she was okay, Ryuji pushed into the lawn and up to the front door.

"Ryuji!" Ann rushed off after him with Yusuke in tow, then Makoto shook off what was bothering her and followed after them.

It was cramped when they all stood in the front entryway, but it was Makoto who called out to Sojiro in the darkness. "Um. Hello? Boss? We've come to check on you."

Her voice was slightly shaky, her words quiet and lacking that strength she had shown when talking with Akechi. Maybe she didn't want to be here either, but she knew it needed to happen.

"Dude, did he pass out or something?" Ryuji poked his head into the living room. "The TV is still on."

Makoto cleared her throat and tried to be more vocal. "Boss? Are you okay?"

Ann came to her aid. "We've brought you some sushi!"

" *My* sushi…"

Ren nudged at Morgana with his feet, then took a few steps forward. Ryuji, Ann, and Yusuke walked into the living room to see if Sojiro was unconscious or asleep or in the room at all. He noticed that Makoto wasn't as willing to follow after them, so he turned to her to

get her attention.

“Everything’s fine. If he starts yelling at us for coming in, we have a great excuse since he left the door wide open and-,”

The thunder shook the windows and took the lights with it. He stumbled trying to regain his ground from the shock of the lightning strike and stepped on Morgana. The cat hissed, Ren offered a quiet apology, but then he heard Makoto step closer to him.

“Um…do you…do you mind i-if I…uh, h-hold your hand…?”

Ren smiled at her, knowing she couldn’t see it, but then offered her his hand. “I’ll keep you safe from the ghosts, my Queen.”

It was meant to be a jab to lighten up the situation, but when she grabbed onto his arm with all her might, he worried that maybe he had scared her. Was she afraid of ghosts? Even after being in the Metaverse for as long as she had been?

It was cute, regardless.

But she was making it hard to focus again. She was pressed up against him and he tried as hard as he could to think about something other than the fact his arm was trapped (happily) between her breasts and he wasn’t excited about how that made him feel…

“C-Can…Can we…g-go? P-Please?”

She was scared, and it thankfully pulled him out of his previous state of mind so he could try and escort her back outside. He didn’t hear any rain, so if they could manage to get to Leblanc, they could wait out the rain there.

Another crash of thunder made Makoto jerk next to him and grip him even tighter. Her head was firmly planted in his shoulder, but he didn’t really mind. Any comfort he could offer her, he would give her. Especially since he was able to get a decent picture of what she would feel like…

No.

He shook his head. She was his *friend* , and she was terrified of his earlier joke and probably of storms. Hadn't she mentioned being afraid of fireworks, too? However, another slow and agonizing second later, he felt Makoto sink to her knees and hold onto his wrist. He was about to ask her if she was hurt, or if she needed help, but another flash of lightning lit up the small entryway they were standing in.

And he heard another scream, up the stairs, that didn't belong to any of his friends.

"Was that Futaba?"

Sadly for him, Makoto was a dead weight to him, so he couldn't run up the stairs and find out. Ryuji and Ann and Yusuke were still roaming around in the living room, but he could hear Ann from time to time saying she wanted to leave as well. Ren took some solace in the fact that there was someone else in the house with them, but now he needed to know if it was Futaba or not. The scream sounded like it could belong to a female, someone relatively young, but he wouldn't know for sure until he *met* them.

"I-I-I want to go home!"

Makoto was literally shaking at his feet, and he was half tempted to drop to his knees beside her and wrap her up in a hug. Tell her everything was going to be okay. He was there, and he would protect her. Nothing bad would happen to her.

Until he felt a presence behind him. It was a blessing in the Metaverse, knowing where shadows were so they didn't get the heads up on the team, but in the real world, he was worried he was in trouble. What if there was a *third* person involved? Was this Alibaba? Were they going to murder them for entering without permission and scaring Futaba or whoever else was in the house?

Another bolt of lightning illuminated enough of the room to catch a small figure behind him, a reddish color to their hair, and bright, wide eyes. Glasses probably. He didn't get to study the person for too long as both the figure and Makoto screamed like the other was a ghost.

It actually made him jump in his place, but Makoto had a hell of a grip on his leg and she was shaking and panting and he was pretty sure she was close to a mental breakdown.

“Futaba?!”

Hearing another voice, Ren started to panic. Especially since it was familiar. Makoto was still clamped to his leg, so he couldn’t move anywhere to hide. In the silence that followed Sojiro’s shout, all he could hear was Makoto mumbling about her sister. He tried to put a hand on her head to calm her down, but she only shook him off, wrapped her arms around his leg with more force, and continued her quiet mantra.

“I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry please save me Sis I’m sorry…”

Ren knew better than to comment on how adorable she was, since she was frightened to death, and he was about to come face to face with Sojiro.

The door swung open a minute later and Ren tried to think of something to say once Sojiro realized he was in his house. He lifted his hand to block the blinding light of the flashlight, but then he heard Sojiro gasp in surprise.

“Y-You?”

The beam dropped, and Ren lowered his hand. He was very relieved that Sojiro hadn’t started berating him yet. “Y-Yeah…”

Sojiro narrowed his eyes and furrowed his brows. “A-Are you two *dating?”*

Not what Ren expected his first question to be, but one that left him speechless regardless. Makoto still kneeled on the ground, holding on to him for dear life, completely oblivious to the fact Sojiro had returned home.

He was spared any more questions when Ann, Ryuji, and Yusuke came out of the living room. “Sorry for intruding,” Ann said sweetly, hopefully working in their favor. “We kinda dropped by to give you a

gift, and we saw your door open. We wanted to make sure you were okay."

Sojiro's eyes lingered on him for a minute longer, then he sighed heavily and rubbed the back of his head. "What are you guys doing here?"

Ren felt like he owed the man an answer, so he braced himself for the consequences. "Futaba. She lives here."

It caught Sojiro's attention, as well as Makoto's, and the room fell silent. Ren began to doubt himself and his lack of restraint for asking, but Makoto pulled herself to her feet, shook off her display of weakness (or at least tried to play it off), then exhaled a breath.

"We mean no disrespect, but…we would like to help you." She took another deep breath. "Please, Sakura-san."

It was amazing how ten seconds ago, Makoto was cowering and trembling like a leaf. But now, she was the beacon of light that he needed her to be, and she gladly stepped up and assumed that role. It was unbelievably attractive…

Sojiro sighed in defeat, and somewhere in his mind, Ren knew they had broken through. "Follow me back to the store. We can talk there."

Chapter 73

Chapter 73

Minako lied to her daughter when Makoto had asked if her father was okay.

Well, Akihiko was alive, looking much better, and had slept fairly well the night that Ren and Makoto went to wherever they needed to go to help him.

What she didn't tell Makoto was that there was *tension* between the two of them, almost like he was upset with her and couldn't find it in his heart to say anything. Minako honestly thought that the only reason Akihiko went to work was to *avoid* her…

She tried to keep her mind busy by doing some household chores, prepping dinners for the rest of the week, but she lost her energy about halfway through the day. She was happy for Makoto, who seemed much more chipper and brighter with her dad alive and well and a wonderful boy to be spending her days with.

A small, tiny part of her was jealous. For half a second. Makoto deserved to be happy, even if Minako felt she was losing everything that had made her happy at one point in her life.

Minako didn't understand what had happened that night, regardless of if Makoto explained it to her when she had returned home. All that mattered to her was that Akihiko was *alive* and *well* . She always assumed *well* would mean *happy* , but Akihiko had either woken up on the wrong side of the bed, had a lot more sleep to catch up on, or he was *angry* with her.

And she knew why, even when he didn't come out and tell her.

Minako had threatened to leave him too many times. Maybe now he didn't want to fight anymore.

How was she going to make it up to him? By telling him she was

lying, or kidding, or didn't know what else to say to get him to understand? She sure as hell couldn't picture herself with any other person at this point in her life, and while Akihiko angered her from time to time, they moved on every time.

Well, he did. She liked to throw it in his face whenever he regressed and it started to hurt one of their children.

She was caught in the middle again. She hoped that she could talk to him once he returned home, to figure out *how* much of him had actually changed. Every ounce of her being liked to tell her that if Akihiko truly wanted to leave her, he would have told her that right after he woke up. Maybe he needed some time to think to himself, which is why he went into work rather than take another sick day.

At least, she hoped that was the case…

It was getting late. Makoto had yet to return home, but she had been kind enough to send her a message saying she was going to be out later than she thought. Minako was more than willing to trust her, and trust Ren, after all they had done to fix Akihiko.

But she had yet to hear anything from Akihiko. He should have been home at least two hours ago. The gym. He was probably at the gym. He was never one to be stuck inside for long, and he had been out of it for a few days, so that's likely where he was.

Then Makoto came home, hugging her shoulders with opposite arms, and it was the first time Minako paused to notice the storm raging outside. As hard as it was to push Akihiko's whereabouts out of her mind, she knew she needed to be there for her daughter.

Minako swiped a blanket from the back of one of the couches and wrapped it around Makoto. "Are you okay?"

Makoto blinked and appeared to realize where she was, craning her neck to stare back at her with fearful eyes. "Oh…um…yes. Sorry…"

She could tell Makoto was tired, so when her daughter told her she was fine and not to worry, Minako watched her fade away into the shadows of the hall and down to her room. Once again, it was her

thoughts that pulled on her until she lost track of time and how long she had been staring at her reflection in the television.

It was almost midnight. There was no word from Akihiko. And she couldn't take it anymore. She grabbed her phone off the table in the living room and called him. She just needed to know that he was alive. That Makoto and Ren's efforts had paid off. He could simply say 'hello' and 'goodbye' and she would be content. Not really, but then she would *know.*

However, instead of an answer, she heard the door click open and she jerked in her place at the sound. Akihiko froze in his spot when he saw her, but Minako ran right up to him and threw her arms around his neck.

"You're alive!"

She released him a few minutes later when she realized he didn't return the gesture. He was always easy to read, and if she were reading him correctly now, he was definitely wanting to have words with her. Words that she probably didn't want to hear from him.

But, he said nothing to her as he walked around her. Instead of letting him walk off, Minako reached out and grabbed his wrist and stopped him.

"Whatever you have to say to me, you can say it."

Usually when she knew Akihiko was hiding something, she would be more forceful in telling him to talk to her. It never did him any good when he bottled things up, and he was never really good at it anyway. This time, she was the one who wanted to stall. She knew what was on his mind, but it was different thinking it than hearing him *say* it.

So she released his arm. He didn't walk away like she expected him to. She watched him ball his hands into fists and she was suddenly thankful she was facing his back and not looking at his face.

"Can I ask you one thing? I don't care what your answer is, but I want you to be honest."

Her hands linked together and she pressed them into her chest to slow her heart. He at least sounded strong, with no hint of weariness in his tone and no sign of fatigue in his posture. It left her emotions a mess, unable to decide if all of this was a good thing or a bad thing.

“Do you even love me anymore?”

His question ripped her heart right out of her chest. She knew better than to try and hide the tears that spilled over onto her face, but she also knew she needed to clear her throat and answer him before he took her stillness as an answer and walked out of her life forever.

“I…I-I do love you, Aki.”

“Then why do you always threaten to leave me?”

If she hesitated, he would grow more upset. If he grew any more upset with her, he would leave her. She knew it. “Because I didn’t know what else to say to you to make you understand.”

He turned around and narrowed his eyes at her. “Understand what?”

“What you were expecting of me! And your children!” She squeezed her eyes shut and lowered her head to the ground. “Aki, I’m not strong like you are. I’m not any good at fighting back. So when my back is against the wall, it’s all I can think of to give myself some space.”

“Did you mean it?”

Minako was grateful Makoto and Ren had saved Akihiko from whatever had been trying to kill him, but now, she had no idea how to take his change. Never once in their thirty plus years of marriage did Akihiko use words point blank like this. It caused her to stumble, something he noticed, but she managed to find her voice before he walked off.

“Yes, I meant it.” A weight landed on her shoulders at the admission, but she powered on through. “And every single time, we talked through it. Because I don’t want to lose you. And somewhere deep down in your heart, you don’t want to lose me either.”

“I want to fight for you, *with* you,” he said quietly, causing her to lift her eyes to look at him. He had his head turned off to the side, but the scowl on his face made her hurt. “But how can I keep fighting for something that’s not even there?”

If you don’t speak up now, he’ll walk out that door and never come back. “It’s still there, Aki.” She reached out to him again and was extremely impressed he didn’t yank his hand away, even if the look in his eyes said that he was debating it. “I know I’ve hurt you, and I can sit here and tell you how sorry I am for the rest of my life, but I know it won’t heal you. But if you’ve been anything, it’s been patient, and forgiving. I don’t expect you to forgive me for this, but please… please find the patience to work things out.”

She braced herself when his fists clenched once he pulled his hand out of hers. “You want to ask *me* to have patience? Minako, I’ve *been* patient with you. But every time you tell me you want to leave, I’m reminded that you *hate* me for what I’ve done to your children.”

“I don’t hate you…”

“I’ll give you some time to think about it.” As soon as she knew he was headed into their room to grab his things, she ran out in front of him to stop him.

“Stop. I don’t need time. I don’t want you to go.”

He pushed past her. “I’m not asking if you want to think about it; I’m *telling* you to think about it. Because the next time I ask you if you love me or not and you *hesitate* , I’ll know for sure.”

Minako let him walk off, but only because he was going to have to come back through her before he left. She took that time to gather her thoughts, pray that she had the strength to stop Akihiko, and also prayed that Makoto was asleep and not catching wind of their argument.

Akihiko was back out in the living room faster than she expected, but she couldn’t let that stop her. She blocked his exit and placed her hands on his chest when he tried to push past her again.

“I hesitated because I was surprised at your question, not because I didn’t *mean* it.” She was relieved to some extent when he stopped resisting. “I’ll take this time, but…I want you to stay. I can sleep on the couch, but I want you here. Please?”

He sighed several painful seconds later, a sign of defeat, but Minako didn’t let her guard down yet. “Fine.” She remained tense, but then Akihiko turned and walked to the closest couch and dropped into it. It was late. He was probably very tired. And as much as she wanted to comfort him, she knew better.

Akihiko sensed the question on her tongue and spoke before she did. “I’m going to sleep out here. That way I can be up and out the door before you wake up.”

His words hurt her, but as she felt guilty for his coldness towards her, she could only agree with him. She reminded herself that if Akihiko wanted to leave her, he would have already done so. He needed time to calm down before he made a drastic decision that could destroy their family forever.

She respected him, being someone who took time to *think* rather than someone, like her, that spoke without thinking. “D-Do you need a blanket or anything?”

“I’ll be fine.”

She wasn’t used to him being so short with her, so she thought it best to stop trying to speak to him and go to bed. Despite his wishes, she ended up bringing him a light blanket from their bed, and he allowed her to drape it over him as he kept telling her he was fine and didn’t need anything. It was enough of a breakthrough that she was able to find some peace of mind and fall asleep.

But that next morning was the backlash she had hoped she wouldn’t have to deal with.

“You lied to me.”

Makoto had yet to touch her breakfast and Minako was unable to keep herself as chipper as she could. “I didn’t lie to you, Makoto.

Your father is fine."

Makoto's eyes narrowed at her. "You told me everything was okay. And it's *not* okay!"

"Makoto," she said quietly, afraid the wrong words would force Makoto to walk out, too. "I want everything to work out in the end. Your dad needs some time to calm down, and I-,"

"This wouldn't be happening if you *loved* him!"

It was a slap to the face. But she couldn't let Makoto know that. "I do love him. I know what I've done to hurt him, and I promise you, I'm not going to let him walk away. I'm going to convince him to stay, because I love him, and no matter what he says, I know he loves me, too."

Makoto pushed her chair back and stood. "You never keep your promises."

She was out the door a few minutes later.

Minako continued to sit in the silence of the apartment, ignoring the thrashing of her heart against her ribs, the burning trail of frustrating tears, the numbness that consumed her mind. The guilt hit her repeatedly, over and over again, because this was all *her* fault. She made the conscious decision when she married Akihiko that keeping her name was acceptable. She learned to deal with it when he asked the same for their daughters. Yet, she always held it against him. Every. Single. Time.

Maybe he was right; to some degree, she would always hate him for what he did to all of them. No matter the toll he took upon himself.

The room became much too suffocating for her, so Minako grabbed her phone and walked out of the apartment and into the humid afternoon. She didn't know what she was going to be doing, where she would go, how long she would be out, but she didn't *care* . At least the humidity wasn't as overpowering as the silence had been back home. It felt nice to breathe in air and *not* feel like it was killing her.

She wandered around Ebisu for hours. She hopped on a train and got off at Shibuya. She thought it would be okay to wander around the area with the thousands of other people who all seemed to be well enough together despite their life crisis. She walked across the street and listened to a man speaking about *change* and the *future* and *society's ills…*

"Acting not in self-interest, but for the greater good…"

Minako walked around the small gathering to avoid listening to the rest of the speech. *The greater good* . Was that what went through Akihiko's mind that day he asked her to keep her name? What was *good* about any of that? What was *good* about forcing their children to *lie* and *hide* so the wrong person never found them? What was *good* about being unable to show love for them when someone happened to be watching?

She never should have let him go through with his decision. She should have fought him. But she didn't. And since she helped create this grave, she sure as hell was going to sleep in it with him, too. If he let her anyway.

His idea of the *greater good* had been giving his children a *future* . And she could respect that, to a small degree, especially given the recent few months. She could understand his fear; she would do *anything* to keep her children safe.

But he wanted the best of both worlds. They both did. And everything had blown up in their faces. She was willing to put it all behind her; Akihiko was not. He needed to understand that Makoto wasn't little. She could take care of herself. Sae had been taking care of herself for years now. Why was it still such a big deal to him to *lie?*

Until Akihiko could let it all go, Minako was positive she would never forgive him, and they would never be able to work things out.

The thought crushed her. But it was true, and she was tired of *lying* . She loved him. She loved him so much it *hurt* , but if she had to choose between Akihiko or her children, she would choose Sae and Makoto. Akihiko *had* to move on, or he never would. She couldn't

stay chained to the past with him.

“Minako?”

Hearing her name, she blinked and realized she had been standing in the middle of the underground mall for lord knows how long. She got quite the surprise when she saw Ren standing in front of her. “R-Ren?”

“Are you okay?”

Was she? No. Would she admit that? No. Instead, she threw on the best/worst fake smile she could. “Nah, I’m alright. I might have just spaced out for a minute.” She then turned the conversation on him to avoid him asking something else about her. “What are you doing here?”

He lifted his bag higher on his shoulder. “I just finished my shift at the flower shop down the way. I didn’t expect to run into you.”

“You work at a flower shop, too?”

A small, maybe nonexistent blush dusted his cheeks as he lifted his hand to the back of his head. Akihiko used to do the same thing when he was flustered. “Um, yeah. Does that make me weird?”

She laughed, because he was cute and it brought back some trace of a better time with the man she spent most of her life with. “Not at all. It’s quite impressive.” Her smile turned more devious. Ren noticed and his did much the same. “Working to impress anyone in particular?”

He puffed out a breath of laughter. “I might.”

Something began to turn in her stomach when his smile turned into a slight frown a moment later. “Something wrong?”

The hand on his strap tightened. Did something happen between him and Makoto? Had she read both of them wrong this entire time? “She came to me this morning, crying, because she’s worried her parents are actually going to get divorced.”

The second the words were out in the air, Minako felt everything fall on her shoulders and *crush* her. She knew Makoto was upset with her. She knew she never kept her promises. She knew she was about to be the person who finally pulled the last block from the foundation and the rest of their lives would collapse.

“I’m sorry, Minako,” came Ren’s quiet voice. “I know this isn’t any of my business.”

“Except for when it affects those you care about, right?”

Ren’s eyes met hers in surprise, but Minako couldn’t hold onto his gaze. “I’m glad Makoto has you, Ren. She hasn’t really had much luck with friends, so thank you.” A pause. A deep breath. “And I can never thank you enough for helping Akihiko.”

“I wish I could say I was proud of this, but I can see I didn’t really do enough.” His head lowered, his hair sweeping over his face to hide his expression. “I hate seeing wonderful people suffering when there’s nothing I can do to help.”

Her heart hurt at his words. “Akihiko and I just need some time. If he truly wanted to walk out of my life, he would have done it already. He’s surprisingly very good about controlling his impulses when he’s upset, so everything will be okay.” *I hope.*

She took a few steps closer to stand next to Ren when he chose to remain silent. “What did you guys do to him to bring the life back to him?”

His eyes lifted to meet hers, then he sighed heavily. “I think it might be a bit difficult to explain it to you, no offense.”

“I think you’d be surprised what I know.”

Ren narrowed his eyes in confusion. “You know about personas, too?”

It was her turn to chuckle at him. “How about we go sit down and talk somewhere?”

There was slight hesitation on his face, but before she could

comment on it, it faded away. “Fair enough. I guess I should have assumed you would know since you knew Sanada.”

Minako straightened her back with a more genuine smile. “Where are you treating me to dinner then?”

It pulled a small laugh from his lips. “I’ll make you a deal. The one who loses in the Big Bang challenge has to pay for the food.”

Big Bang challenge? “Are you going to tell me what this is first?”

Ren scoffed at her. “What? You don’t like the thrill of an adventure?”

It worked. “Fine. I accept your bet, little boy.” His grin matched hers. “But be warned; I can eat more than you think I can.”

He rolled his eyes. “We’ll see about that.”

Chapter 74

Chapter 74

Ren's eyes widened at her as she finished off the rest of her water.

"Don't challenge someone to a battle when you know nothing about them."

He remained wide-eyed and in utter shock for another few minutes before he threw his head to his chest in defeat. "I never would have guessed you could have finished all that." His shoulders lightly shook in laughter. "Guess I'm not all knowing like I thought, huh?"

What Minako wouldn't admit to Ren was that she was truly *disgusted* with how much she had eaten. She felt slightly sick. She was pretty sure she gained a solid five kilograms. She only wanted to rub it in his face for misjudging her and her pride was what helped her finish off the giant burger.

"This coming from someone who thought I was cheating on my husband who was dating his *daughter?* " She laughed softly when Ren's back straightened and the smallest trace of pink colored his face. "You don't know anything about me."

Ren's features softened a bit. "I may not know *you* , but I know you're a good person." He looked down at the remainder of his meal. "And someone I feel I can talk to."

There was a clear change in the atmosphere that put pressure on her stomach and made her sick again. "Well, whatever's on your mind, you can tell me." She threw in a jab just to make herself feel better. "Even if you need help on how to woo my daughter."

The blush darkened for half a second, then it was gone completely. "You must have taught Makoto very well how to fake being happy when you're really not."

Yep, she was going to be sick. "What?"

“I don’t mean to be offensive,” he started, but never once looked away. “But Sanada has never once struck me as someone who hides his feelings. You and Makoto, on the other hand, pretend to be okay when things are not.”

She had nothing to say to him. Not only was she feeling ill, thanks to her dinner, the conversation topic wasn’t much help either. Desperate to change the course of their chat, she said, “This isn’t what we were supposed to talk about.”

Ren shook his head. “No, it wasn’t.” He took a deep breath before he broke eye contact and dropped his shoulders. “My parents fought all the time. I don’t think they are *wonderful* people like the two of you. But yet, both of you are more miserable than my parents, and they don’t love me nearly as much as you guys love Makoto. How is that fair?”

Minako took a second to *breathe* . “If you knew what we have done to our children, you wouldn’t have thought all this.”

“But I *do* know, a little…” he added with slight hesitation. “But you still love your kids. Haven’t you both suffered enough?”

“This is my point as well, Ren.” She sighed heavily and leaned back into the seat. “Akihiko has a bad habit of chaining himself to the past. He’s lost a lot in his life, and I know he doesn’t want to lose his children, but he’s doing this to himself. I can’t keep pretending that it doesn’t hurt when I’m trapped between my children’s happiness or Akihiko’s desire to keep them safe. Sae and Makoto can take care of themselves.”

His voice was much quieter when he spoke. “So you don’t want to be with him anymore.”

It wasn’t a question, but a statement. It took the wind out of her lungs. “I love him. I really do. And honestly, had it not been for Makoto’s trust in you, none of this would be happening.”

She held up a hand to calm him. “It’s a good thing, Ren. Makoto was always the trouble child, which is why Akihiko always felt obligated to protect her. She’s the baby, and she was the one who looked past

this entire mess because she knew he loved her." A sad smile came to her face. "Whatever you did to him, I think it helped him realize that she didn't need that protection anymore. She's grown up. And it's hard for him to digest, which is why he needs some time."

"And what about you?"

It took more effort than necessary to bite back a groan. "If he can come to terms with this, then I can accept whatever he decides to do. But this goes beyond you, and Makoto. I will tell you this, however," she added with more strength in her tone. "I will do what I can to keep him. I promise. Not for Makoto's sake, but for my own. But we both need time, Ren."

He chose to forgo a verbal response and simply nodded his head in understanding. Minako took that few minutes of silence to regain control over her emotions, her stomach, and mentally told herself that this was her last chance to prove herself to Makoto, and to Akihiko.

She would do anything for Makoto. And that meant she had to *fight* for her father. She had to. She knew what would happen to her if Akihiko walked out on her.

"So." Ren finally cut through the quietness that fell over them. "I'm curious to know your level of understanding about personas."

Finally. A change of subjects. A subject Minako felt comfortable about, kind of. She was more excited to see the look on Ren's face when she told him about all the personas she had been able to summon back in the day, how she also managed to balance school and Akihiko and *death* .

She would leave out the ending. She didn't really *know* the ending well enough to talk about it…

Her hands clasped together on the table and her smile widened. "Where do you want me to start?"

Ren eyed her curiously as he leaned back and crossed his arms. "How did you find out about them? From Sanada?"

“Not at all.” There was more confusion painting his features. She chuckled quietly. “I found out about them the same way I take it you all have.”

His eyes narrowed. “Oh?”

“I summoned one myself.”

And there it was. The look of pure, unadulterated disbelief. He almost fell out of his chair. “Wh- *What?”*

She continued on like he was fully attuned to her voice and not still reeling in shock. “Yep. It was either my friend’s life, or I had to fight. So I put the gun to my head and hoped for the best.” Minako would have placed a bet on whether or not his brain was functioning at this point. “And here we are.”

Several minutes later, once she returned with a refill on her drink, Ren shook his head. “No. That can’t be. Morgana said he couldn’t sense anything from you like he could with the others.”

She scoffed playfully. “You think I’m a liar?”

“Well…” He carefully released his breath. “No. I didn’t mean that. But…why would Morgana lie to me, then?”

Minako relaxed as best she could into her seat. “I don’t have the power anymore.”

Ren’s eyes narrowed in more confusion. “What?”

“I lost them, a long time ago, when I woke up from my coma.” It would be hard to explain it to him, having not been able to understand it herself. Plus, how much had changed? Makoto never spoke about putting a gun to her head to call out her persona. Akihiko and Mitsuru had been able to use sheer willpower at one point. Would someone in their group know about Igor? Or Theo? Being able to wield multiple personas in general? Or was she the only unlucky human to know such power?

Ren’s expression softened, so she figured she needed to say *something* . “I don’t understand it. One day, we’re all fighting in a

distorted version of our school: a giant, grotesque tower, and then we're standing face to face with death. We won, clearly, but most of the fight is hazy, and the rest of the time after that is gone from my memories."

"You called out to your persona with a gun?"

Minako lips curled slightly. "Messed up, huh? I'm sure Mitsuru would be able to explain it better than I could. The first few months were terrifying, but I got used to it. It also helped that everyone else was doing the same with more confidence. I couldn't let them down."

Ren's eyes fell from hers. "I see…"

"We're a lot alike, you know?" She didn't wait for him to recover from his surprise. "I was a transfer student myself. Second year. Spent a lot of my childhood being shipped off to wherever I could get in. It was nice, being able to travel, in some regards, but it was nice to come back home."

"You were a transfer student?"

She nodded. "Sure was." Her smile spread over her face. "Funny, because I met Akihiko that year I transferred home, and he was a senior."

There was a light dusting on his face a few seconds later once he made the connection. She couldn't help but laugh at it. "Is that why you're so supportive of me?"

"When Makoto told me about you being the new student before you arrived, I did think it would be cute. Then she told me about the day she helped you get home and I sensed it then." Her smile widened. "The transfer student always gets the cute senior."

The blush remained on his face this time around. "Oh." Before Minako could test the waters and humiliate him even further, Ren shook his head. "Can I ask what affinity your persona was? Just out of curiosity?"

Minako leaned into her hands on the table with another grin. "What, growing uncomfortable with me, are you?"

His eyes fell to the table again. “Um…”

She waved her hand dismissively with a light chuckle. “I actually can’t tell you. Because I could summon more than one.”

That was when something clicked in Ren’s mind. She could see it in his eyes. At the same time, he looked like he saw a ghost. When he spoke, his voice was quiet, yet oddly confident. “This is why I have these headaches around you. You’re a wild card.”

Now it was her turn to be surprised. “Y-You have the power…?”

Ren broke out into a cocky half-smile. “I should have guessed. You strike me as someone that everyone wants to be around. Someone who sacrifices everything to help others. Maybe that was the feeling I had when I spoke to you in the beef bowl shop. It wasn’t that you were just a mother, but a person who lived the life I’m living now.” He rubbed the back of his head. “This is really weird.”

The burning question didn’t remain in her heart for long. “Can you speak to Igor? Or Theo? Can you take me to them?”

He lost his smile as his lips turned downwards. “I…I actually can’t. It usually happens in my dreams at random.” His eyes narrowed. “Is that not what you did?”

Minako shook her head lightly. “N-No…I went to a specific place. Either at our mall or in that demented tower.”

Another click. “I could try and take you to Mementos. I can go to the Velvet Room there.”

“Will you take me now?”

Ren leaned his back into his chair, intrigued and confused by her question. “Honestly, I’d rather not. It’s dangerous.”

Her voice was quiet, but her tone was deadly. “I want to know what happened to me back then. No one knows why I lost these powers. No one can tell me what happened after our battle with Nyx. More than anything, I want to fight with my family rather than watch from the sidelines.” Minako pushed herself to her feet. “If you won’t take

me, will you at least *talk* to him for me?"

Ren slowly nodded his head. "You mentioned someone named Theo?"

"I-Is…" Minako paused for a second, trying to think how Ren would know Igor but not Theo. "Is he not Igor's attendant?"

"Oh. I actually have twins. Two girls. Split personalities." A small smile came to his face. "The one likes to snap at me. The other is pretty chill. But I've never heard of a Theo."

Minako's heart fell into her stomach. Was this not the same Igor then? Why would Theo just up and leave the Velvet Room? *Could* he up and leave? And if he did, where did he go? Why hadn't she found him?

"I can ask about him," Ren said quietly, pulling her from the questions being tossed around in her head. "But…" he added with some apprehension. "I don't make any promises. Igor is kind of vague with me when I try and ask him a question, like how the hell I got these powers and why I need them at all. But I'll try…"

It would be selfish to demand more from him, or for him to take her to Igor himself. Mementos? Where was that? She didn't want to ask him in case he was able to figure out *why* she was asking. He was a sharp young man. Plus, she didn't want to give him a reason to distrust her and have that ruin a hopefully blooming relationship between him and her daughter.

"Thank you."

Ren picked up on the sadness in her tone. "I'm sorry, Minako. I just…I don't want to involve you in something like this. So I-,"

She held up a hand to stop him. "No, I understand. And really, I thank you. It's selfish of me to expect more from you."

"I'd be pissed too, if I'm being honest." She gave him a confused look before he continued. "Not knowing what happened, why you lost your powers, why you can't find your friend. It's frustrating enough for me getting these headaches when I feel like they *mean*

something. It's like someone is trying to keep me from understanding what's going on."

Minako offered a smile. "But you seem very well together. Not many people your age would be able to manage like you are. You should be proud of yourself for that."

His smile was more forced. "Yeah, but I just wish I *knew* ."

"How did you end up here, if you don't mind me asking?"

When she visibly saw his shoulders tense, Minako almost told him to forget it, but he shook his head before she could tell him as much. "I actually…came up here to serve a sentence. I'm surprised you *didn't* know."

Wait…

"A sentence?"

He took a slow, long inhale. "I'm technically a criminal…"

Minako stared back at him, then threw her head back and laughed. "Stop it."

"I'm serious."

She continued to laugh until she saw the seriousness on his face. "Oh." It left her mind spinning. "H-How? You don't strike me as someone who would do anything wrong."

She regretted her choice of words, to an extent, when he flashed a cocky grin. "Well, if you must know, saving a woman from an abusive man who falls over and cracks his head is an assault now." Her eyes narrowed at him, but he looked away. "Sorry. I've accepted it. People at school freak out when I come down the halls. Everyone was very eager to put me in my place when I first arrived here. Which is why I am forever grateful for Makoto. She was the only one who reached out to help me. Granted she didn't know who I was at the time, but I was at my breaking point, and she was there for me."

Minako found herself smiling at the way Ren spoke about Makoto. She had heard the story from her daughter, minus being a *criminal* , but hearing it from Ren was different. She was proud of her, for being someone's support when it was needed, and her heart warmed in her chest.

"I'm glad you've become a part of her life," she said softly. "You've done so much for her, for me, and you ask nothing in return."

He chuckled from across the table. "I doubt that. I still feel indebted to her, to Sanada, to my friends. I wish I could tell everyone how much they've meant to me."

Knowing there was a connection between the two of them now, being in a similar situation at a similar time, with a power that no one else had, she was able to actually understand him. "I know exactly what you mean." Her hands clasped together under the table. "But you also have to give yourself credit. I was just like you, unable to convey my feelings for my friends, and it got the better of me. I felt like I wasn't doing enough for them. I couldn't get rid of all their problems. I couldn't *reach* them. I started to hate myself because of it. But Mitsuru and Akihiko liked to remind me from time to time that I wasn't just a leader; I was a person. I didn't have to be strong all the time. I didn't have to dive into every single problem and solve it. They all *knew* how much I appreciated them simply because I stood beside them when they needed someone."

She sighed, realizing that she had rambled on, but Ren smiled at her. "I'm really glad to have met Makoto, too. Because I was able to meet you." He laughed to himself as his eyes fell to the table. "And I'll keep that in mind. They all accepted me, criminal status and all, and I hope I can support them just as much."

"You'd be surprised how far just listening to someone will take a relationship."

The smug grin was back on his face. "Makoto strikes me more as someone who'd rather listen than talk."

Minako chuckled to herself. "She gets that from her father." She then sighed. "Don't tell Akihiko about your status. At least, not yet. He'd

murder you for sure."

"He actually already knows."

She choked on her breath. "What?"

Ren shrugged his shoulders. "I was terrified of cops, for obvious reasons. The first cop I saw here looked like he was judging me as a criminal without knowing I was one. But Sanada was different. That was how he found me at the coffee shop. He knew about my record, but he didn't believe it. Said something about how he *knew* a bad kid from a good one."

She found herself smiling again. "You made a great first impression, then."

"I'm actually more terrified of him now, being Makoto's dad, than I was of him being a cop."

That made her laugh. "Good. You should be. But Akihiko is more docile than you think. He just *looks* like he would kill you. Do you know who would actually kill you if you hurt Makoto?"

She saw him swallow hard. "Um, her sister?"

She did her best to put on her "scary" face. "Me."

He chuckled softly, then nodded his head. "Good thing I don't plan on hurting her then."

Minako eyed him as she leaned back and stretched out her back. He didn't keep eye contact with her for long, but she chose not to comment on the blush spreading across his face. "It's getting late, Ren. You should probably head home."

He helped her to clear the table and walked beside her to the station. She didn't really want to leave, since leaving meant she would have to return home and she wasn't ready to face Akihiko yet. Not right now. But if he thought the same and didn't go home, she didn't want Makoto to be alone.

"I really do appreciate you talking to me."

She turned her head over to Ren just outside the station. “Oh. Well, I should thank you, too.”

He bowed his head lightly to her. She really needed to tell him to stop that. “I hope you have a wonderful evening, Minako.”

She said nothing more to him as he turned and headed towards his line to get home. All alone, she debated about wandering around, having a drink or two to calm her nerves, then head home. Maybe one of her friends could meet her? All she needed was one drink…

She shook her head, angry that she was even so nervous to *go home* . She still had her daughter to look after. If she stayed out too late, she would likely wake Akihiko when she got home, if he was home, and she would rather *not* chance a late night run in with him.

It was hard, but she steeled herself, walked to her line, and told herself it was going to be okay.

She picked up a bottle of liquor on the way home, just in case.

Chapter 75

Chapter 75

The words on the document on his desk blurred together to the point he couldn't even read it.

Then again, everything was blurry.

It had been a long week. Akihiko could count on one hand the hours of sleep he had gotten in the past few days. He was slightly unnerved that every time he closed his eyes, there was darkness, and his body was always tense and ready for a fight. That was *if* he could close his eyes and *not* toss and turn on the goddamn couch because he was so upset.

He knew he should put more trust in Amamiya. Never once did he think the kid was a bad person. Never once had he done anything to discredit himself. Even if he was a Phantom Thief, even if he had the same powers Makoto had, Amamiya was a *good kid* .

Amamiya's digging on him and the curious relationship he had with his daughter, on the other hand, left Akihiko feeling like Amamiya was up to something. He could never put his finger on *what* . If anything.

He was bitter with himself, for the tears he had seen in his daughter's eyes (even if they didn't actually fall) because he couldn't *let go.* A small part of him wanted to, to finally break the chains he had bound himself with years ago, but that one lock would never open. If everyone knew who Makoto was, who Minako was, who Sae was, what would happen to them?

Probably nothing worse than what was happening now.

If he could go back and do it all over again, he would. In a heartbeat. It killed him to know that he may never have a relationship with Sae, no matter how hard he tried, all because he was scared he would lose her to some criminal.

Well, he lost her anyway.

And he was well on his way to losing the rest of them, too.

Akihiko had looked into the first steps of filing for divorce, but the second the thought came to his mind, he shook his head and slammed his fist into whatever surface had been available. First of all, how could he technically file for divorce when he wasn't "technically" married? And if he could, why would he *want* to? All because Minako chose to do whatever it took to keep her daughter happy? What was so wrong with that?

But not only did he worry that she would never be happy with him again, it made him think that maybe *he* wasn't happy anymore. Makoto was going to college soon anyway. He doubted Minako would want to stay with him without someone there to keep her from leaving. So, if he waited, would things get worse, or better, or stay the same until he could carry through on the separation once Makoto wouldn't be around to stop it?

He leaned forward and held his head in one of his hands propped up on his desk. Minako was his other half. If he cut her out of his life, he was going to fall faster than he was falling now. Makoto might take it harder and then never speak to him again, just like her sister.

While deep down, he truly wanted to fight, he was also tired. He was tired of the arguments. He was tired of her threats. He was tired of feeling like he would never escape from his personal hell. He was tired of spending so much energy on his regrets, the past itself, and on a future that was looking dimmer and dimmer as time dragged on.

He told Minako he needed time, but days later, he still felt the same. Lost. Pitiful. Agitated. Hurt. Was it wrong of him to be angry with her? Was it wrong of him to tell her that she had pushed him for the last time and he should pack his things and leave?

Each question had the same answer: yes. Yes it was wrong of him to feel the way he was. He never deserved Minako, but she stayed and told him she loved him, despite that small portion of her that *hated* him. Maybe that's what he needed to hear her say, that she

truly despised him for years for what his actions had done to their children.

Plus, he would always love her. He would always love what she gave him; a reason to fight, two beautiful and intelligent daughters, and a life he never would have had with anyone else. No matter how many times she wanted to walk out on him, she didn't. Hopefully, this time wouldn't be any different. Hopefully.

Maybe a few more days would help him realize exactly what he would be missing in his life if he chose to walk away.

"Ah, I see you're doing well."

Akihiko didn't recognize the voice at first. Instead, he felt extremely numb, like someone had just clubbed him on the back of the head. His nerves were fried. His weariness seeped into his bones and he almost collapsed onto his desk. He was more tired than he thought he was…

That voice though…

When he found the strength to look up, he saw Akechi's smile spreading over his face. He had no idea why Akechi would be there to see him, but he figured it would be better to find out what the kid wanted and kick him out.

"Can I help you?"

Akechi took a step closer to his desk. "I heard you were out of the office the other day sick. I assume you're feeling better?"

The teen must think him *dumb* if he truly believed Akihiko was going to accept that was why he was visiting. "The body breaks down as you get older. I guess it all hit me in one day." He sighed heavily. "Enjoy your youth."

Akechi chuckled. "That seems so unlike you to say." Then he lost most of his humor, except that stupid smug grin. "You look unwell. Is everything alright?"

Well, he sure wasn't about to talk to Akechi about his life drama, so

he simply shook his head. “Just tired. I’m fine.” It wasn’t until Akechi came to stand in the middle of his office that Akihiko realized there was more he wanted to say. “Something you need to say?”

The smile dropped from his face. “There’s something… *strange* going on.”

That caught his attention. For the first time in days, Akihiko sat up straight in his chair, more awake than he had been for a long time. “Strange?”

“Piqued your interest, yes?” Akechi lifted a hand to his chin and laughed quietly. Akihiko grew annoyed when he pulled up a chair and sat down in front of his desk. “I’m grateful I have someone who’s not one of the corrupt ones to turn my thoughts over with.” He then turned to look behind him, checking to make sure it was safe to speak. “The Phantom Thieves.”

Akihiko almost rolled his eyes and told the boy off, but he was very curious to know what Akechi knew about them, if anything at all. Did he know *who* was involved? And if he did, what did he plan to do with that information? “I’m listening.”

“I believe they are responsible for the mental shutdowns happening in this city.”

Mental shutdowns?

The guy with the black mask?

Was he a Phantom Thief?

No. There was no way. Makoto would never work with someone with malicious intent…right? Would she even *know?* As much as he didn’t want to admit it, Makoto had been rather sheltered. She took after him, more awkward around people, and it usually kept them at a distance. It was odd that Amamiya managed to get through to her on some level, and then the mysterious events started happening… like he *brought* them with him from wherever he came from.

Was there more to Amamiya than he thought? Could his gut instinct be wrong? Could Minako be wrong?

No.

“You think the Phantom Thieves caused those crashes?”

Akechi frowned. “You cannot disprove the correlation between cases. Kamoshida, Madarame, Kaneshiro; they all underwent a change in mental states overnight. In a split second. Both conductors had suffered much the same. Other innocent people have been victims, just on a smaller scale, or swept under the rug in political scandals.”

Akihiko wouldn’t doubt any of what he was saying, but he *knew* Makoto. He would like to think she *knew* Amamiya. There was no way what Akechi said was true, even if he had a valid point.

However, something that clicked in his mind was that there *was* a difference. “I think you’re wrong in that regard.”

Akechi narrowed his eyes. “Oh?”

Akihiko leaned back in his seat and folded his arms over his chest. “There is a difference. The Phantom Thieves are targeting *criminals* . Kamoshida was their first target. Some copy-cat has been out there *hurting* people long before they came out.”

There was a flash in Akechi’s eyes. “A copy-cat?” The look was gone the next second. “With all due respect, Sanada-san, I believe they are thoughtful individuals who perform like, let’s say, Jekyll and Hyde. They leave their calling cards for criminals to earn the publics’ favor. Then, they attack and create terror amongst the city.” A glare came to his eyes. “They must be apprehended.”

Akechi’s demeanor set him back a little. While it was easy to see his side of things, Akihiko *knew* Makoto wouldn’t get wrapped up in criminal activity like terrorist attacks and *murder* . Even if he thought she wouldn’t barge into a criminal’s hideout either…

But there were people who had the power to wield a persona that chose to bring destruction. So far, Makoto was the only one who had confirmed she had a persona. Amamiya and Ryuji had to have one as well. All the Phantom Thieves had to have one…

He couldn't come out and say it to Akechi, but everything suddenly made sense to him now. Amamiya and Ryuji changed Kamoshida's heart. The other boy, Kitawaga, came along and helped them change Madarame's heart. Makoto joined for Kaneshiro. A new target, a new member. But the mental shutdowns had started before the Phantom Thieves had made a name for themselves, *before* Amamiya had arrived in the city…

There *had* to be someone else. An antagonist…

The guy with the black mask.

Could that person be the one who "founded" the Phantom Thieves later on, but went off to do their own thing? And if so, who? And *why?* Who else did Makoto and her friends hang out with? Or did they not know this person at all and they were two separate cases?

"You still have your doubts I take it."

Akihiko glanced back up at Akechi as the teen dropped his head. "You act so disappointed."

Akechi drew his shoulders back as he inhaled a breath. "Perhaps there is some truth to the rumors then." His brown eyes flared once they met his. "Perhaps you really are one of them."

He was taken back by the *anger* in his eyes, but then Akihiko laughed. "You might wanna get in line. There's already enough people waiting to arrest me for this."

"Sae-san would love to see you in prison for this mess."

His statement caused Akihiko to stumble for a second. However, Akechi was quick to pounce on it. "She means a lot to you."

Did…Did Akechi *know?* No. Sae would never say anything to him about their relationship. *Never* . Was Akechi testing him then? "She's young. She works hard. She has the right attitude for someone in law enforcement."

"You're close to her sister as well."

What was happening? “I wouldn’t say I’m close to her as much as she’s been helpful in past cases.”

He had to find a way to derail the conversation. He may not give Akechi enough credit, but the kid was intelligent. He was likely picking up on all of Akihiko’s half-second hesitations and the slight edge in his voice.

Thankfully, Akechi relented. “I do not mean to pry, Sanada-san. But this does bring me to another concern of mine.” He paused, but then said, “I worry Sae-san is out of control and on her way to becoming a target for the Phantom Thieves.” Akechi took a breath while Akihiko struggled to come to terms with what he had said. “And as you know, I believe these Phantom Thieves *murder* . One day, under their good name, they will. I fear that Sae-san may be on their list.”

His heart began to race at the thought. However, he had to hide that concern or Akechi would notice. “Sae is fine. The Phantom Thieves don’t kill; they change the hearts of criminals.”

Akihiko had lost some of that previous conviction and Akechi picked up on it. “You seem worried.”

No. Makoto was not a murderer. She would never work with anyone who *killed* . Makoto was smart enough to know when people were being fake with her. That was why she didn’t have many friends. Sheltered or not, she should be able to pick up on one of their members using their powers for *evil* , right?

“I wouldn’t count Sae out of anything, Akechi-kun.” Akihiko met the eyes of the boy in front of him. “She has a level head. She’s intelligent. She knows what she’s doing. She also knows how to take care of herself.”

A disturbing smile came to Akechi’s face. “You’re right. My apologies. I worry too much.” The teen pushed himself to his feet and stretched out his neck. “I know you tend to think in a positive light, but I would reconsider your stance on the Phantom Thieves.”

The young teen bowed before he walked out the door, leaving

Akihiko a confused and irritated mess. If Akechi came by to talk to him about the Phantom Thieves, why did he mention Sae and Makoto? Was something wrong with Sae? Was someone after her? He would have to find out, even if he knew Sae wouldn't tell him the truth. She did have a "palace" after all, but Makoto did tell him she didn't want the others to know. Sae had to be safe...for now...

But why bring up Makoto? Was Akechi curious as to why he had interrupted their chat the night Makoto told him about the Metaverse? Was she talking to Akechi about it? Or was Akechi trying to fish for information and Makoto was his source?

Akihiko may not be one hundred percent convinced that all of the Phantom Thieves were *good* , but they were sure as hell bringing their fair share of trouble.

He chose to put it out of his head completely, for the moment, and got back to work.

Akihiko remained at the station for longer than he intended, but he knew once the sun fell behind the surrounding buildings, it was time to call it a day. He didn't want to face Minako, not yet, but he couldn't use that as an excuse to not go home. He hoped Makoto would be home at least, given the hour of the day, so he figured it would be for the best to head out.

It was his lucky day. Minako wasn't even home and Makoto was sitting on the couch holding her phone in her hands with the TV on in front of her. She turned to him when he came into the room and he felt some of the weight on his shoulders dissipate when she smiled at him.

"You're home."

He chose to sit down next to her and he could tell he was exhausted when the couch seemed to swallow him up. "Where's your mother?"

Makoto shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. She sent me a message saying that she was going to be out, but she didn't tell me where she was."

Akihiko was a mix of irritation and relief, but he quickly shook it out of his head. “Can I ask you something?”

The phone in Makoto’s hands lowered to her lap as she looked at him in confusion. “Um. Okay?”

The quicker he asked, the quicker he could put it to rest. “You’re not getting into any trouble, are you?”

Makoto slightly jerked at his question. “What?”

He groaned as he rubbed his hands over his face. “Look. There’s a link between what you and your group of friends are doing and these mental shutdown cases.” He looked her square in the eyes and prepared to read her reaction. “I need to know that you’re not the ones behind it.”

He could usually tell when Makoto was being secretive, but she had either learned how to hide it better or she was being honest with him. “I promise, Dad. We don’t do anything besides change people’s hearts for the better.”

“And you trust Amamiya?”

That got her to sit up a little straighter. “You don’t trust him, do you?”

He sighed heavily. “It’s not that I don’t want to trust him as much as I can’t stop myself from thinking that these odd events only started once he moved here under even stranger circumstances.”

Makoto clasped her hands together on her lap. “And that makes him a bad guy?”

She was being more defensive than he expected, yet not answering his questions at the same time. “It doesn’t help that he was trying to dig up dirt on me, then a few days later, someone wants me *dead* .”

There was a flash of anger in her eyes. “He *saved* you.”

“And if he’s only trying to make himself look good so I’ll drop my guard?”

“Dad, stop.” Makoto stood from the couch, but she refused to face him. “Ren is a good guy. He’s been very kind to me since the first day I met him. He does a lot for other people when he doesn’t have to. He’s been through enough, but he’s always so positive. I trust him. I trust him with my life. So please,” she said as she turned to him. “Trust *me* .”

He was sure if his guilt didn’t suffocate him first, the couch would. He was *so tired* . “I do trust you, Makoto, but…please be careful. If you ever feel like something is wrong, never hesitate to tell me, alright?”

Akihiko felt slightly better when the smile came back to her face. “I will, Dad. Thank you.”

He kept any remaining doubts to himself as the night carried on and Makoto went off to her room for the evening. It was late, he had not heard one word from Minako, but he was far too tired to think straight. He figured it would be wise to get his things ready for the next day while he could and a nice, hot shower sounded *amazing* .

And it helped. It made him more tired, which was a wonderful thing, because he desperately needed sleep. If he was going to start figuring out the Phantom Thieves’ goals and methods and how they were *not* the same as whoever was causing the mental shutdowns, he needed a clear head. And a lot of rest.

The water burned his skin, but it helped ease the tension in his shoulders and his neck. The steam was refreshing in its own way, being absorbed into his lungs and making him feel *warm* . It encased him like a weak hug, telling him it was okay, he would be okay, and he *felt* okay.

He could have fallen asleep standing up, but he got that slap to the face when he had to step out of the shower. It was cold. He grew tense again. If Minako came home, he would have to face her. His reflection in the mirror reminded him he was *pathetic* and he couldn’t do anything right. There was nothing left for her to *love* .

Sleep. He needed to sleep. The quicker he was able to gather his things, change, and make it to the couch, the quicker he could shut

his mind off and *rest* . He ignored the rampant thoughts trying to pull him down as he wrapped a towel around his waist and took a deep breath before opening the door.

The air was much colder in the room, but that wasn't what froze him in his place. Minako sat on the edge of the bed, as if she was waiting for him. He felt her eyes on him for the longest time before he heard her breathe out a laugh.

"Sorry." It hadn't been what he expected her to say, but not soon after her quiet apology, she came to her feet and lowered her head. "I can sleep on the couch tonight. You look like you need some sleep."

He had *so much* he wanted to tell her. However, nothing came out of his mouth when he opened it. Minako didn't even notice as she moved about the room, but he felt his hand reaching out to her arm when she made a move for the door.

Her eyes locked with his. Even in the subtle darkness that surrounded them, he could tell she was hurting. That it was hard for her to be as close as she was to him. To pretend that *her* life wasn't falling apart because of him.

And through it all, she smiled at him. "Get some sleep, okay?"

Instinctively, his hand tightened around her forearm when she tried to step away. But he still couldn't say a *damn* thing to her.

She chuckled at him again, but it was laced with so much *sadness* that it tore him apart. "You're tired."

"Yeah, I am tired," he finally said, then released the breath he had been holding. "I'm tired, Minako. I'm tired of feeling like this. I'm tired of making you all feel like this."

He felt miserable. His muscles *screamed* at him to go to sleep. His eyes burned from exhaustion. But more than anything, his heart hurt. If it was even still *there* .

Minako took a cautious step into him and lifted her eyes to meet his. "I'm tired of watching you fall apart, Akihiko."

Something cracked in his subconscious when he realized she was still referring to him by full name. “You hate me. You always have. So why the fuck are you still here?”

There were tears coming to her eyes, but she never once looked away from him. “Deep down…” She hesitated, took a deep breath, then held a hand over her eyes. “Yes, I hate what you’ve become. I hate what’s become of this family. I hate the way you shoulder every damn burden and regret and never let us help you. I hate that you have a wall around you and every time I break it down, you put another one back up.”

She grew quiet as she wiped at her eyes and it became much more difficult to *breathe* . “Then why are you here?”

Both of her hands covered her face. “Because I *love* you. I always have and I always will. No matter-,”

“You just told me you *hated* me!”

God had that been hard to get out of his throat with how tight it was. But Minako continued to hide behind her hands and sob, ripping his heart into pieces and leaving him one, giant, chaotic *mess* .

“I should have fought you harder when Sae was born, but I told myself the most important thing was that you were there for her. That you would always love her. And you did. Even when she *hated* you.” She rubbed her eyes before her hands fell to her side. “I will never be as strong as you. I will never be as forgiving as you. And I know I have no right to ask you to forgive me now, but I will. Because I’m tired of acting like I’m fine when I’m losing the most important thing in my life.”

His hands clenched. “But you hate me.”

Minako was silent, and in her silence, he felt the last shred of strength leave him and he needed to sit down. So he did. He threw his hands to his face to hide the tears he could feel leaving a burning trail down his face. This was it. She hated him. She could never forgive him. And now he had that confirmation. He should have known better than to believe he deserved that happy ending

with her when he had destroyed so much of her life the day he begged her to remain a part of it.

He didn't register that Minako had come to sit next to him, nor did he realize she was yanking his hands from his face until she grabbed his face and turned him to her.

"I don't hate *you.* I hate myself for letting you fall to this level. You can hold this over my head until the day I die, but I'm not going to let you suffer like this alone. You've been able to pick up a million of my shattered pieces and put me back together so many times in the past. And now, I'm going to do the same for you. Whether you want me to or not. Because I told my daughter I would fight for you. So I will. For her sake. For your sake. And for mine."

She held him tighter when he tried to pull out of her hold. "I don't want you to."

Through her tears, she smiled at him. "You say that, but I know you don't mean it."

He narrowed his eyes at her. "How do you expect me to stay when I know you *hate* me?"

Her smile remained and she dropped one of her hands to press against his chest over his heart. "I know I've hurt you. So let me pick up the pieces and put you back together. Then, I will respect whatever decision you make."

Akihiko was about to protest the idea when she leaned over and silenced him with a kiss. He tried to remind himself that she *hated* him, in some regard, but his heart and the rest of his body was *dying* for her to bring him back. He was so desperate that he lifted his hands to rest against her sides and gently pushed her back on the bed.

Stop it.

He captured her lips again as her hands danced over every inch of exposed skin.

Stop it.

Her lips left his to kiss the crown of his head and leaned into his ear and whispered, “I love you, Aki. I do. I love you so much.”

Stop it!

“D-Don’t ever leave me…” He rested his forehead against hers as he tried to stop the tears. “Please.”

Her smile widened slightly and her eyes glowed with light he *needed* to see. “I won’t ever leave you. I promise.” She pushed herself up to kiss him lightly on the lips. “I don’t care if you tell me you want me to leave; I never will. I’ve fought with you for this long. The only way I’m leaving you is when we both die.”

Her hands held his face again as he studied her eyes for the *truth* . “Tell me that you love me.”

And he saw it. “I love you, Aki.”

She put him back together that night with her touch, her lips, her promises, her breathless “ *I love yous”* …

In the morning, as he looked down to where Minako had been curled up in his arms, he told himself nothing in the world would ever take her away from him.

Not even himself.

Chapter 76

Chapter 76

Ren could still not believe it.

All those headaches.

All those odd, yet comforting feelings he had.

Minako *was* him however many years ago.

It was still hard to swallow because he couldn't figure out *why.* Why did she lose her powers? Why did he have headaches? Why did fate just happen to put him in the same city a previous wild card had lived? Was there even a reason?

"I can't believe this."

He had told Morgana about his chat with Minako the second he had come home that night. Not only was Morgana stumped, but so was he. Not that anything related to the Metaverse made sense, but now it was *real* people and their pasts not making sense. It was frustrating not knowing the answers, not knowing where he could go to ask his questions, and worst of all, not knowing *when* he would get answers.

"She said she lost her powers. How is that even possible?"

Morgana sadly shook his head. "I don't know. Maybe that's why she can't remember, because it was something that could piece everything together and someone wants *you* to find that out first."

Ren growled. "It's not fair to her." His hands ran through his hair. "I'll talk to Igor and see what he says. If he says anything at all."

"I think that's all we can do right now," the cat replied. "But even so, it seems she's taken this rather well. You know, the whole 'missing memories' thing."

“I doubt that.” He caught the way Morgana spoke about *missing memories* and it made him more upset. Both of his hands gripped at his hair painfully. “I saw the flash in her eyes when she asked me to take her to Igor.” He lifted his eyes to meet Morgana’s. “She’s just very good at hiding her true feelings when it’s about her.”

Morgana huffed out a sigh before he jumped onto the bed next to where Ren was sitting. “I know you want to try and help that family, but I don’t think you should do much more than you already have. The more you dig yourself into their mess, the more it’s going to backfire on you.”

His hands clenched in his hair again. “They’re good people.”

“I know, Ren, so let them work it all out.” He felt Morgana’s paws on his thighs. “I have a feeling everything will be okay in the end. But they need to get there on their own. Just like…us, I guess.”

It was Morgana’s argument in a lot of cases Ren tried to dive into. And he appreciated the advice, or he would be in so far over his head he wouldn’t even know it. He felt more obligated to help Makoto and her parents because it was *Makoto* , but also because he *felt* something with both Minako and Sanada. He may not have been able to name it for a while, but he could now.

Parents. Sanada was a better father figure than his own dad back home. Minako was a better mother figure than his mom.

Well, maybe one day?

“Something funny?”

Ren scratched Morgana behind his ears. “Nah, nothing. We should probably get ready for bed. It’s late.”

Morgana’s eyes lit up at the idea, but Ren was hoping that once he was out, fate would send him back to Igor and he could question him about all the thoughts he had. He wanted to know who Minako really was, and why Igor wouldn’t have mentioned her before this. If Igor knew Minako, he wanted to ask why she had lost her powers and what it would take to get them back. Hell, there was a lot he wanted

to know, but he could already anticipate Igor's answer…

Find out for yourself.

Sadly, there was no trip to the Velvet Room or a chance to speak to Igor or the twins. Ren woke up irritated and exhausted regardless. Now that he actually had questions to ask that weren't about him and his odd role in life, he wouldn't get summoned….

"Wake up, Ren!"

Morgana landed on his chest and Ren coughed some of the air out of his lungs. The cat smiled down at him madly. "C'mon! The quicker you finish your work with Boss, the quicker we can head over to Futaba's palace!"

Life never stopped for a second, huh?

Ren was finally able to push himself off the bed and walk over to his "dresser" to change into something decent. Morgana was right. The quicker he got his work done with Boss, which hopefully wouldn't take long, they could organize another trip to the palace. Morgana had warned them on their first trip that this palace was different and they should move with caution. It was also slightly more personal for Ren, being Sojiro's daughter, so he needed to be prepared.

He also knew they *needed* Futaba or Medjed would be able to carry out their threat. No one on their team was a techie individual, but Morgana swore up and down that Futaba had the talent based off what intel he had collected when he had snuck into her room.

The summer break was an odd source of comfort; it allowed him plenty of time to think and to plan and to hang out with his friends without drawing unwanted attention.

But, he did still have to earn his keep from time to time, even if Sojiro was much more open and lenient on him now than he ever had been before.

He was also learning how to perfect making coffee, how to read what the customers wanted, how to know how to make it actually happen. It was a nice change of pace, putting his intellect towards

something other than battling monsters and trying to figure out what the hell was happening with certain people in his life…

“You’re finally up.”

Ren rubbed at the back of his head as Sojiro’s eyes narrowed at him through his glasses. But then the man huffed a laugh and turned back to the customers sitting at the opposite end of the bar. Ren sighed from his spot on the stairwell, walked up to the bar, and grabbed the apron to get to work.

“Wouldn’t have pegged you as someone who likes to sleep in.”

Ren jerked at the voice before he slowly tied the strings behind his back. *Breathe* . “Well. I’m full of surprises.”

Ren was hoping for a laugh, or a comment to let him know he wasn’t about to be *murdered* , but when he turned to face Sanada, the older man’s eyes narrowed. It froze him in his place. “Any more surprises you’d like to get off your chest?”

He swallowed. Hard. “I can make a decent cup of coffee.”

It didn’t work like he had expected. “What’s going on with you and Makoto?”

Ren forgot that Sanada was someone who was *blunt* and *direct* . It caught him off balance and he swore Sanada caught it. “We’re just friends.”

“Just friends?”

As of right now, yes, but Ren didn’t quite feel comfortable saying that to someone that could pick him up and break him in half. “Just friends.”

“And you expect me to trust you?”

The tone in his voice made Ren fumble for words. Had something happened in the family again? Did Minako speak to Sanada last night and *that* was why he was in a bad mood right now? But why would he be mad at Ren? For speaking to Minako when it wasn’t

really any of his business?

Sanada's sigh caught his attention. "I want to believe you're a good kid, but when I think about how you were trying to dig up dirt behind my back when someone is out there trying to *kill* me, it makes me think."

That made Ren step back. "You think I'm trying to kill you?"

"Are you?"

At first, he was slightly offended. But he also tried to remind himself of the situation. He had the power, just like the mysterious black mask person that Sanada had said had been trying to kill him. He *did* try looking into him as a person, which ended up turning up nothing but more confusion.

"I know this all looks curious, but I wasn't trying to look into you just because I was looking to blackmail you or anything." Ren took a step closer so he could fiddle around with something as he spoke. "I did it because I knew Makoto was close to you and she had been miserable for weeks. In retrospect, I should have realized she was going to go into a palace, which is why I thought this drama with you and Minako was what set it off."

Sanada groaned into his hands. "Was this before or after you assumed I was *dating* Makoto?"

Ren suddenly felt sick. "Uh…"

"You shouldn't be diving headfirst into somebody else's life, Amamiya. Not mine. Not Minako's. And you better watch your back before diving into Makoto's."

"Look, I understand that Makoto means a lot to you, but she also means a lot to me." Ren paused to take a deep breath to steady himself and to try his best to ignore the slight glare that came to Sanada's eyes. "I know you don't know me very well, but I would hope you would know by now that I have no intention of hurting you or Makoto. You both mean a lot to me."

The older man leaned back in his seat and sighed again, but didn't

say anything in reply. He was quiet long enough that Ren was able to make two other customers' order before Ren caught him reaching into his pocket for his wallet.

"I want to trust you, Amamiya, but it's not something I'm willing to hand to you." He placed a few coins on the counter in front of him. "But as long as you promise to keep Makoto out of trouble, I would do anything."

Ren's heart hurt at the drastic change in tone Sanada used to speak to him, but then he pushed back his chair and stood up. Ren offered him a simple nod of his head. "Thank you."

Sanada said nothing more to him as he made his way towards the door. "If you have any more contact with Sae, *please* let me know, Sakura-san."

Ren's heart hurt even more as he watched the man walk out the café. Sanada might have been a little rough around the edges with him, but Ren knew it was only to protect those he cared about. And he cared about them more than Ren could care about any of his friends. It was impressive, slightly intimidating, yet heartbreaking knowing there wasn't a damn thing Ren could do to help.

He was given a chance though. A way to prove himself. Something he figured would be easy enough to do. *Keep Makoto out of trouble.*

He would do everything in his power to see he did just that.

The rest of the week went by fairly quickly. Between spending time with his friends, working at his random jobs, going to the Metaverse and the Palace, he was tired. The palace was starting to come together at least. But as it did, it also proved more challenging. Futaba's shadow seemed helpful, but then would lead them right into a trap that almost killed them. Whether she wanted their help or not was a commonly asked question.

It strangely reminded him of Sanada's shadow; desperate to do *nothing* while fighting back when it was least expected. But no matter how many times Ren told himself that his team would succeed, just like they had last time, the sadness of it all always

made him *stop* .

He would never know *pain* like they had.

He would never know *regret* like they had.

But he sure as hell wouldn't be running away, not when he knew he could make a difference.

However, Makoto always seemed so *tense* . Ren usually asked her before they ventured off into the Metaverse if she was okay, but she always told him she was. She had been opening up to him immensely the past few weeks, so it was odd to see her shutting him out again, especially after she had come to him in tears at the beginning of the week about her parents and their possible separation.

He finally had a more appropriate time to ask when they had all returned from Futaba's palace and everyone else had gone their separate ways.

"Are you sure you're alright?"

Both her parents had been pretty upset the last time he had spoken to them, so he was interested to see how things were playing out. Not because he was *nosy* , but because it greatly affected Makoto. And if that was why she was so down, yet very focused in the Palace, he wanted her to tell him.

"Yes. I'm fine. Thank you."

Short, sweet, and to the point. Ren grabbed her wrist before she could walk off to the station. "I don't want to pry. It's just that you're being distant again and that usually means something is wrong."

Makoto's eyes fell to the space off to his side. "I'm sorry." Her arm crossed over her body to hold the other tightly in her hand. "I just feel like there's nothing I can do anymore. I mean, I think everything is okay, which is why I haven't said anything. I-I don't want to prattle on about what *could* be happening when it's not a big deal."

A small smile played on his face. "Why are you apologizing to me?"

“You’ve done a lot for us.” She still refused to meet his eyes. “I feel bad for not telling you all of this, but there wasn’t much to say.”

While he didn’t really want to come right out and ask, he found himself doing it anyway. “Everything is okay? You know, between the two of them?”

Makoto shrugged her shoulders and Ren bit his lip. “I honestly don’t know. My dad always comes home at least, but most nights, he sleeps on the couch and he’s gone before I wake up. My mom is still upset, but a little better now than last week. So that means something, right?”

“They’re both impressive people.” Ren took a step closer to her when she finally locked eyes with him. “Maybe they need a little bit more time. But I’m sure everything will be okay.”

She slowly nodded her head, followed by a weak smile. “Thank you, Ren.”

He didn’t ask her if she knew about him speaking to each of her parents, so he decided it was best to change the subject completely. He threw his arm over her shoulders once she was facing the station again and began walking off.

“So, when do I get another date?”

His arm became slightly more warm. He smiled. “Um…I-I don’t know…” Ren almost commented on how precious her stutter was when she was flustered, but she shook her head and turned in his arm. “Actually, there is something I meant to ask you, but it’s been pushed aside for other pressing matters.”

The seriousness in her tone made him curious. “Oh?”

“I heard a student at school mention another student who holds a job in Shinjuku that’s shady and dangerous. I’ve been meaning to investigate, but…I’d feel better going with someone.”

It was hard to contain his laughter. “You still focus on school even when we’re on break?”

Her eyes widened before they dropped to the ground. “Oh…um, I-I usually go in once a week, in case someone needs tutoring or someone to talk to.”

“You’re a wonderful spirit, you know that?”

And he meant it, but he also chuckled at her reaction: bright red face, downcast eyes, nervous hand motions. She was super cute when flustered.

“W-Well…w-would you want to go with me?”

“Is this a date?”

Ren held his breath. He knew that they weren’t *technically* dating, just “pretend” for now, but he would take any chance he could. It would make it feel more natural when he made it *real* . Assuming she was okay with that.

Her expression was much the same as earlier, but she gave him a slight nod. “S-Sure…?”

In an effort to ease her nervousness, his arm dropped and he grabbed her hand. She didn’t seem to mind, and he didn’t have to tug her along like he usually did. As a matter of fact, Makoto actually walked side by side with him once her anxiety faded away as they both exited the train in Shinjuku. It was nice, walking hand in hand with someone who had been through so much hell, but still chose to *help* others.

She might be the only person who could understand his pain and anger and help him cope with it. Plus, she was cute. Super cute. Super hot when she was in the Metaverse bashing shadows into nothing.

“Ren?”

He snapped back to attention, not even realizing he had zoned out enough to stop moving. Makoto gave him a look, but he was quick to cover up his split second daydream with a laugh. “Sorry. I still can’t get over the fact you go to school over break.”

She was annoyed by his comment, and it was a look Ren had never had the luxury to see before. Her eyes narrowed as she glared at him, her arms crossed over her chest, and he matched it with a grin.

“You’re cute.”

His grin spread over his face when she huffed and turned on her heels to face away from him. He could get used to this.

“The student tells me they heard about someone working in a club in Kabukicho. Let’s go.”

However, the second they both stepped under the gaudy sign and onto the street in Kabukicho, Ren had a moment of hesitation. They shouldn’t be here. While nothing *bad* had happened (to him; he’ll never know what happened to Ryuji that night), he knew what they were walking into.

Trouble.

“Um, Makoto, I don’t think this is a good idea.”

She turned to him with widened eyes, but Ren was the one who couldn’t maintain eye contact. How was he supposed to tell someone who charged into Kaneshiro’s club without batting an eye that a few sleazy promoters were going to wrap her up in some giant mess?

“I know what I’m doing, Ren.”

She sounded determined, but he also recalled her sounding very determined when they had been trapped in the alley right after he called her out on stalking him. She was also determined when she told his team she would meet Kaneshiro.

“I don’t doubt that, but…I just don’t think this is a place for us to be wandering around in this time of night.”

When her eyes narrowed at him, he suddenly became cold. “I just want to talk to someone who may have seen a high school student with Shujin’s uniform.”

“You also wanted to *talk* to Kaneshiro and got yourself into serious trouble.”

“And that all worked out in the end, did it not?”

Her tone and her expression gave him pause, but when she turned her back on him and began walking off, he grew aggravated. It didn’t take him too long to catch up to her and he grabbed her hand to stop her. “I know you’re smart, and I know you can kick someone’s ass if they try and do something to you, but we shouldn’t be out looking for this kind of trouble.”

She shook his hand off. “If someone from Shujin is caught up in a similar situation as I was with Kaneshiro, it’s my duty as student council president to help.”

He couldn’t form words fast enough to stop her a second time. However, right before she crossed the street, she turned back around. “I’m just going to talk to people. If someone makes an inappropriate move, we can leave. But I need to do this, Ren.”

It took him several seconds to finally nod his head. He knew she was smart, that she was there for a simple purpose of information gathering, but he kept his eyes on her the entire time. He should have followed after her so he *knew* she wasn’t falling prey to any beautiful words from fancy men, but he chose to keep his distance. He chose to trust her. If she looked uncomfortable at any point in time, he would rush over and help.

He just hoped he didn’t misread an expression or body movement and barge in and have her snap at him. He didn’t like when she yelled at him. Even if she was adorable when her eyes flared with anger and her nose scrunched up enough that made him bite back a laugh and she always leaned forward into his face, as if begging him to *kiss* her…

“Amamiya?”

Ren jumped in his place and caught himself before he lost his balance. But when he turned to address who had spoken to him, he felt like he was *stabbed* . It was powerful enough that he couldn’t

find any words to say.

“What are you doing here?”

A few *good* things about Sanada’s question and confusion for spotting him in Kabukicho was that he probably didn’t know *Makoto* was with him. However, Ren also knew it was going to be damn near impossible to *lie* if he asked. But he had to try. If Sanada found out that he let Makoto walk into the district, he would *murder* him.

“As long as you promise to keep Makoto out of trouble…”

“Oh, hi. You startled me.”

Sanada’s eyes narrowed at him. He struggled to breathe. “What are you doing here?”

I am not with your daughter, I promise! “I come here sometimes to speak to the fortune teller. She’s really good.”

His half-lie didn’t work the way he wanted it to. “You shouldn’t be here at all.”

Ren pushed his hands into his pockets to hopefully hide how *terrified* he was right now. “Sorry. I came down here once by accident. I’ve never had any problems with anyone here.”

“You should count yourself lucky.” He watched as Sanada wiped a hand over his face and sighed heavily. Ren started to feel that uncomfortable pain in his heart. “Now get home. Don’t let me catch you here again. It’s dangerous, especially this time of day.”

Well, he couldn’t just *leave* . Hell, he hadn’t been able to watch Makoto from across the street in the time he was speaking to Sanada. But, he nodded his head as *slowly* as he could to try and give him more time to think…

“You’re lying to me.”

Ren cursed inwardly. Of course the hesitation would have been picked up by an experienced *cop* . Someone that knew him somewhat well. And now he was at that point where he either

needed to abandon Makoto in Kabukicho and panic for the rest of the evening about her safety, or he needed to come clean.

Either way, he was *fucked* .

“Amamiya.”

Ren couldn’t even *look* at him. Which he was sure did nothing good for him.

“Wouldn’t have pegged you as a liar.”

That one stung.

“Why are you here?”

He tried to half-lie again. “I’m actually here looking for information. That’s all I can say.”

While Sanada was very quiet, Ren could *feel* his eyes destroying the inside of his brain. “And you’re walking around, hoping to find this said information through a bar owner or a host?”

Ren shook his head to help clear the mounting tension on his shoulders. “No. Shop owners. I know better than to talk to people who would rather try and lure me into their business.”

The older man sighed again and Ren felt something in him crack. “You know, this is why I thought you were a good kid. Because you’re a terrible liar.” He took one step towards him and Ren was tempted to run off. Makoto would be fine on her own, right? “You’re protecting someone.”

Oh god did he *know* he was here with Makoto? Had he been following him around? That thought at least sparked some anger because if Sanada was following him around, he sure as hell wasn’t *trusting* him. “And how would you know that?”

He met his eyes for the first time since he called out to him moments ago. But despite Ren’s initial anger at the distrust, Sanada was clearly confused by the tone in his voice. “I *don’t* know. That’s why I’m asking. Because I’ve been in the business long enough to

recognize the signs of lying. This is the first time you've made eye contact with me. And you've never done this before."

He was going to have to cut his losses at this point. He felt terrible lying, being *caught* in his lie, not fighting Makoto hard enough so he didn't have to be in this predicament, and for believing Sanada was the type of person who sneaks around to call him out on something he was doing *wrong* .

Maybe if he told him he *tried* to stop Makoto, he would make his death painless and quick?

He never got his chance to explain.

"D-Dad?"

Chapter 77

Chapter 77

It had been so long since he had wandered around Kabukicho. He chatted with a few store owners that had waved him over. He spoke to a few informants who had asked him where he had disappeared to and why his name was being tossed around more often. While he knew he had been pulling attention for the *wrong* reasons, it was still nice to be back where he felt he belonged.

The second he saw Amamiya, however, his attitude changed.

Akihiko thought about running up to him and throwing him into a wall and demanding him to go home because he was *stupid* for showing his face in the district. But he didn't. Maybe Amamiya was lost and had no idea how to get out of the area. He was pretty *lost* if that was the case, so Akihiko worried he could have fallen for the idea of easy money. He didn't think Amamiya was that stupid, but it was more innocence and naivete.

Until he listened to the boy ramble on, never once meeting his eyes, and never once speaking with that confidence he always heard. He thought Amamiya was done *lying* to him when he came out and called him out on his nervousness, but Amamiya never got the chance to defend himself.

"D-Dad?"

Akihiko felt like Amamiya had punched him in the gut. His stomach turned to the point he almost doubled over. "M-Makoto?" Makoto stared back with wide eyes and a still body, so he turned his eyes to Amamiya. "This is why you were lying to me."

He was *pissed* . Not only had Amamiya taken his daughter to a place neither of them should ever be, he knew as much and tried to *lie* his way out of it. That earlier image of throwing the boy against a wall sounded *so* good right now.

Amamiya wisely took a step back. “I know I shouldn’t have come here. I’m sorry.”

“So you *knew* not to walk around, but then you bring my *daughter?”*

While the teen tried to come up with an answer, Makoto came to his defense. “I brought him here. Ren actually tried to convince me to leave, but I have something I need to do first.”

He didn’t know what shook him up more: the fact Makoto stood up for Amamiya or the fact that Makoto had *willingly* come to the area and brought along someone else.

“You know better than to come here, Makoto.”

His glare didn’t work as well on Makoto as it had on Amamiya. “I’m looking for someone who had been spotted here. I had to come.”

Akihiko’s hands curled at his side. “Why didn’t you just tell me instead of coming out here on your own?”

“Because I’m student council president and it was brought to my attention-,”

“Do you know what happens here, Makoto?”

He bit his lip to keep himself from *screaming* at her and giving her a list of crimes he dealt with on a weekly basis. Crimes that Makoto could have *easily* found herself a victim of without even knowing. He never told her how *dangerous* Kabukicho was because he always thought she would *listen* when he said *stay away.*

He should have known better. But not only was he angry with Makoto, he was angry with Amamiya. All he asked was for him to keep Makoto out of trouble, yet here he was, doing the exact opposite.

“If someone at the school is in trouble, it’s my duty to help.”

Makoto’s confidence was doing *nothing* to calm his rage. “And now you’ve put not only yourself in danger, but someone else.” He groaned under his breath, then lost control of his temper. “Do you

enjoy putting yourself in trouble, Makoto? Do you *want* something bad to happen to you? Do you have any idea what would happen to those who care about you if you were to go *missing?* "

However, Makoto's eyes narrowed at him. "I'm not a little girl. I know what I'm doing."

"Just like you knew what you were doing when you stormed into Kaneshiro's club?"

"I'll take her home," Amamiya said as he stepped between the two of them. His eyes remained downcast, as if he was still afraid Akihiko would *strangle* him. "I know I've upset you, and I'm sorry I didn't fight her harder when we came here."

"You won't take her anywhere, Amamiya." He walked around the boy and stood directly in front of Makoto. "You're going to tell me exactly what you were doing here when we get home."

"But I haven't found the student yet. I can't give up now."

Makoto was very rarely this *stubborn* around him and it unnerved him. With each word he spoke, he grew more and more frustrated. "I'm taking you home. Now. Amamiya, you will follow us to the station. I don't want to hear another word from either of you."

Amamiya seemed more than willing to obey him *now* , but Makoto huffed indignantly before she sighed loudly. "Fine."

Akihiko chose to walk behind the two of them, but thankfully neither of them spoke to the other. Amamiya offered a slight bow and another apology before he stepped off the train at Shibuya Station. Makoto sat in her seat with her arms crossed, wearing an expression that was a mix of anger and fear. But he never spoke to her, not until the door to the apartment closed quietly behind them.

"You'll know when dinner's ready. Go to your room."

"I'm not ten anymore, Dad."

"Now."

Again, Makoto scowled at him, but she did what she was told. Akihiko followed suit and walked into his room and planted himself at his desk. If he was going to ease his mind, he needed to focus on something else. He needed to calm down before talking to Makoto again about what in gods name she would be doing in a part of town where yakuza *thrived* off luring young females into their sex-trafficking circles.

He didn't want to scare her, but at the same time, she was old enough to know the truth. He could even show her statistics of how when he first arrived, one in ten young female teenagers would fall into the trap of money for "easy work." Twice a week, he was arresting teenagers for selling drugs for the yakuza. Once a week, he was breaking up fights with deadly weapons over turf wars. He could still see some of the young girls' faces when he found them, alive, but *damaged* a few weeks later. He would never clear out the yakuza no matter how hard he tried or how hard he wished it to happen.

And Makoto already had one strike against her from what happened with Kaneshiro. He'd be a fool to let her walk around Kabukicho *alone* just because she "wanted to help."

He pulled out a handful of notes from his desk and tried to put Makoto's recent escapade from his mind. It had been a long time since he had the chance to sit down and *think* without interruptions from Amamiya, Makoto, Akechi, or his bosses. He hadn't been able to sit still the past few days while at home because of his uneasiness around Minako, but while things weren't "normal" again, they were getting better. For now.

It was a perfect time to mull over his thoughts about something else for a change.

He started with the Phantom Thieves. His run-in with Akechi left him much to think about. While he could see how the teen could make the connection between the actions of the Phantom Thieves and the mental shutdowns, Akihiko had a hard time believing it.

If Mitsuru had been correct about their members, there was no way. While he was still on the fence about Amamiya, Ryuji and Makoto he

knew well enough to know they weren't *killers* . Makoto may like to get herself into trouble, but there was a line between being ignorant and *murder* or creating panic in the public. Ryuji especially didn't have the heart to pull something like that off without being so loud and rambunctious about it.

Akihiko knew next to nothing about the other two, but he wasn't going to find out much sitting at home. He wanted to dig a little deeper into Amamiya, to find out *who* he had assaulted and *why* they remained unnamed. If Amamiya had "friends" to pay off someone and keep them off the record, why would a judge sentence him to a year probation in a different city? Fuuka had told him there was nothing else on his record, but without being able to understand the bizarre nature of the crime, he just had to go off what he knew about the boy from the time he had spent around him.

At least he wasn't a good liar. That much he made positive an hour ago.

Maybe instead of interrogating Amamiya, he would pull Ryuji aside and corner him. For all he knew, Amamiya was devious and cunning, but hid it well with his charm and good deeds. Ryuji was, if anything, honest to a fault. If he were to get a straight answer from somebody, it would be Ryuji.

But as he continued to jot down random thoughts and questions to ask or keep in mind, he found a name.

Wakaba Isshiki.

It was the same name Sakura had given him over a month ago. He first heard it months prior from Fuuka when he did some basic digging on Shido. He sat with the edge of his pen tapping away on the desk's surface, remembering that Fuuka had told him to talk to Mitsuru about her. She ran a lab, possibly funded by the Kirijo group…but…she committed suicide. Mitsuru knew very little, if anything, about her when he had asked.

So what the hell did *Sae* want with the information? And how would that all tie in with the mental shutdowns?

Unless…

Unless Isshiki's lab was researching the Metaverse, which would have caught the attention of the Kirijo group, but then she freaked out about her findings and killed herself before Mitsuru got the chance to speak to her?

He needed to know more about Isshiki, but he didn't feel comfortable asking Sakura. Sae wouldn't tell him a damn thing. If he was lucky, Akechi might know about her, but the less he interacted with the boy, the better.

That was when something else struck him.

Shido was involved with the lab, or trying to be on some level. He wasn't a person Akihiko would categorize as "good", and people that voiced their opinions against him were either fired from their jobs or found *dead* . Heart attacks. A classic mental shutdown symptom.

His partner several years ago had a heart attack and died. A mental shutdown? Had he said something about Shido at one point? Even back then?

…Did *Isshiki* have a mental shutdown, too?

Akihiko never liked to speculate, but he pulled out a blank sheet of paper and did exactly that. Those who spoke out against Shido either died of a heart attack or were forced out of their positions due to fury building in the people. If Shido took an interest, or even dabbled in Isshiki's lab that may have researched the Metaverse, then he could very well have the knowledge about how to *kill* without actually *killing* .

The guy with the black mask .

He was a hitman. Shido likely knew this man and hired him to do his bidding while he could address the public like the saint he tried to pretend he was. But… *why?* What would be his end goal? If he were to silence every single person that disliked him, he would probably end up killing off half of Tokyo alone. If Akihiko could figure out that goal, maybe everything else would fall into place?

But why was someone trying to kill *him?* He never even knew who Shido was, other than he was a politician. He didn't know about the scandals or his interest in the lab until after Ohya had asked him to look into Shido.

Murakami.

She had gone missing. She had a tendency to do her job *well* , not caring who she was humiliating by exposing years' worth of corruption.

Did she speak out against Shido, too? That had been the first time Akihiko heard his name…

Akihiko knew he would have to get in contact with Ohya again, which shouldn't be too terribly hard to do. He wanted to talk to Mitsuru, to Fuuka, to try and confirm or eliminate Shido as a possible person of interest in this giant mess. He *had* been more popular on TV lately, for as little as he watched of the news in the first place. Perhaps that was him trying to sway the public to find those rotten weeds and kill them before he could do whatever he was wanting to do. Perhaps someone was trying to set him up. Perhaps he had nothing to do with any of this.

He threw his head back and groaned loudly. It still didn't explain the hits on *his* life, so maybe the black mask guy was taking his case more personally. It didn't make any sense really, but neither did the other half of his life. Either way, people had tried to kill him multiple times, his bosses took an interest in figuring out his relationship with Makoto, Akechi was starting to ask too many questions…

He was in the process of grabbing his phone and sending a message to Mitsuru asking her to meet with him when it went off in his hand. It was a simple message from Fuuka.

We need to talk.

Fuuka was very rarely so forward and to the point, but it was confusing enough that he put his phone back in his pocket and carefully stowed away his notes. He pushed the chair back and stood up a little *too* eagerly and slammed into Minako. He hadn't

expected her to be in the room and she clearly didn't expect him to get out of his chair so quickly.

However, neither of them said a word to each other. He knew he should apologize for colliding into her, but Minako looked *afraid* of him. It kept him from saying anything to her.

"…Sorry," she whispered as she took a step back. Never once since he had known her had she ever been timid, but that was the only way he could describe her reaction. "I, uh…wanted to tell you dinner was done."

She turned on her heel and almost made it out of the room before he managed to find his voice and stop her. "You don't need to be afraid of me."

Her quiet laughter filled the silence. "Sorry."

Akihiko sighed, then before she could walk away, he took a few steps closer to her. However, when he stopped, he didn't know what to say. He didn't want to think that he was still upset over her latest threat, but he was. A little. He was still healing. She likely knew that, which would explain her unease around him. But it had been over a week now. He was tired of feeling like he was walking on eggshells around her.

"Minako, I know I've been distant lately, but I don't want you to be afraid of me."

"You're going to end up leaving."

Her statement hit him harder than he expected it to. "N-No. I mean… unless you want me to."

Her head fell to her chest. "Do you want to leave?"

"No, I don't." He took another step into her. "I don't want to leave you. I don't want you to leave me. I don't want to keep feeling like there's a wall between the two of us because we're scared…"

Minako lifted her eyes to meet his, but at least there was a small smile on her face. "You're right. I thought you were okay a few days

ago, but then you kept coming home late and I figured you hadn't really forgiven me."

He cringed at her words, trying to think of some way to tell her she was right without actually saying it, but then he felt her arms around his shoulders and she leaned into his chest. "But I won't leave you, Aki. I promise. And I'll promise you every single night."

Her arms tightened around his neck and he couldn't resist wrapping his around her back and pulling her closer to him. "I still love you, Minako," he whispered into her hair. "And I always will."

She pulled back in his arms, her smile stretching over her face as she used a hand to brush away a few tears. "And I love you, Aki."

The kiss that followed lasted half a second before there was a knock on the front door. Ten minutes ago, he would have welcomed the distraction, but now he was half tempted to pull Minako back into him and ignore whoever rudely interrupted his moment…

Minako giggled against his lips before she pulled away from him. "We can finish this later. I don't want Makoto to starve either."

Right. He was angry with Makoto. And she was home. It probably wasn't the best time to start anything. So he did his best to ignore her laughter as he walked around her and to the door. Who it could have been, he hadn't a clue, but so help him if it was Amamiya, he was going to throw that boy out of the window.

For real this time.

But it wasn't Amamiya.

It was Mitsuru and Fuuka.

"W-What are you guys doing here?" he asked after they both had stepped inside.

Akihiko remembered that Fuuka had sent him that urgent message not even half an hour ago. What the hell could have been that important that they decided to meet him at his house rather than at their usual hangout? Where was Ken? Was he okay? Did this have

nothing to do with *him* but his daughter, or Minako?

“Something has come up.”

Fuuka and Mitsuru spared each other a look, which confused the hell out of Akihiko. “Um. Okay. What’s going on?”

Fuuka took a tentative step forward. “I…I found something today while I was looking around on the dark web for any information on Kaneshiro to see if he was part of anything bigger or if he acted alone.”

He felt something grab him by the throat and squeeze. Had they come over to speak to Makoto? Did they know *she* was involved? Not that he doubted they would have her arrested, but he didn’t want them interrogating her and having her give them a list of who else had been involved with Kaneshiro and have that get back to Sae…

It was hard to clear his throat enough to talk. “What did you find?”

“Your name.”

Akihiko blinked, but both Mitsuru and Fuuka kept nervous eyes on him. “And…what does that mean?”

“Someone has taken a hit out on you. 500 million. That’s what that means.”

The wind rushed out of his lungs in one mad rush. “W-What?”

Mitsuru didn’t give him time to digest the information. “They also put out an equally separate reward for any information about any family or close friends.”

He ran his hands through his hair in frustration. “Who have I pissed off enough that they would give that kind of money away for my head?”

Fuuka shook her head lightly. “We don’t know yet. And I can’t say for sure, but I’m seeing some similarities in the code for Medjed being used on the dark web. Meaning that if my hunch is correct, someone in this group of hackers might be who put your name up.”

“Your family is now in real danger, Akihiko.”

He groaned loudly. “What do you want me to do? Makoto is halfway done with her last year of high school. Her and her mother would fight me to stay. Nothing I say to them will-,”

Mitsuru held up a hand to silence him. “You misunderstand. While having Minako and Makoto leave the city until this matter is resolved would be for the best, I know better. Which is why I’ve asked for reinforcements.”

Akihiko narrowed his eyes. “Who?”

“You’ll find out in the morning.”

Chapter 78

Chapter 78

Makoto wasn't *furious* , but she was pretty angry.

She knew what she was doing in Shinjuku. Her dad didn't need to degrade her intelligence in front of her friend, and then get snappy with her friend because he *still* didn't trust him.

It was annoying. She had hoped by now her father would trust her and know she wouldn't be throwing herself into trouble. She went to Shinjuku to investigate. She brought a friend because she *knew* the type of area she was in and she *knew* it wouldn't be wise to be alone. What was so hard to understand about that?

Well, she sure as hell couldn't just *quit* . Someone at school could be in trouble. It was her responsibility to make sure the student was okay. Her dad was busy with other people, other problems, and Makoto felt able to do this *one* thing.

She huffed out a sigh as she closed her study materials and put them back in her bag. She hadn't been able to get much studying done. She was irritated. She was upset. She was hungry. She kept thinking she should probably text Ren to let him know she was sorry for the way her dad treated him.

Makoto didn't want to ask if dinner was ready, in case she ran into her father, so she threw herself on her bed with her phone in her hand. She pulled up her conversations with Ren and worked on creating an apology that didn't sound forced.

I'm really sorry for my dad treating you like an asshole. Delete.

I apologize for how the evening went. Would it be acceptable to ask you to accompany me again some other time? Too long. Too stiff. Delete.

I'm sorry about today. Good enough.

She fell back into her pillows, letting her phone rest on her stomach. How was she ever going to convince her dad that Ren was a *good* guy? If anything, her dad should have taken all of his anger out on her, since she was the one with the idea and she kind of drug Ren along, even if he didn't want to go. He shouldn't be *doubting* Ren anymore. He saved his *life* . What more could Ren do to prove himself?

The phone vibrated and she sat up quickly to read the message. *I should have stopped you* .

Makoto's shoulders dropped with her sigh. Great. Now Ren felt bad. He didn't need to feel bad. *Would it be okay to go back sometime this week?*

She held onto her phone while Ren typed out his message. She didn't want him to feel obligated to go, but she really didn't know who else would go with her. She wasn't about to ask her *dad* .

I don't think that's a good idea .

Her eyes narrowed as she worked on her reply. *Someone could be in trouble. I need to help them.*

Let Sanada do it.

Now she was getting angry with him. *He needs to learn to trust me. I know what I'm doing.*

It's dangerous, Makoto .

I know what I'm doing.

She had much more she wanted to say to him, but her fingers couldn't work fast enough. That and she would likely regret anything she would have told him.

He cares about you. You shouldn't be disobeying him for the sake of proving a point.

If Ren would have told her that face to face, she might have punched him or something. Proving a point? She was trying to *help* .

Was that wrong? She knew the risks of walking around Kabukicho. She had heard stories. She was prepared. She might have forgotten that was her father's district since he had been transferred to Shibuya and she didn't know where he was supposed to be now.

But still. Ren shouldn't be siding with her dad because he was afraid of him.

Look, Makoto, I know you want to help, but I think you should tell him. He'll probably go with you next time.

Oh. So now Ren didn't want to go with her? She couldn't find the heart to come out and ask him if that was true. *I understand. I apologize for the trouble.*

She was quick to put her phone on its charger and walk away before Ren had a chance to say something in his defense or add to her frustration. She was hungry. After dinner, she would check her phone and maybe pick the conversation back up if she felt like it.

She really wanted to go to the palace. They were close to the end. Morgana had told them that. They could finally help Futaba and she could help them with Medjed, somehow. She could smash a shadow's face in all while doing some good and not having to worry about her parents *coddling* her.

But, food came first. It was also too late to ask the group if they wanted to go to the Metaverse. They could go tomorrow. They still had a week until Medjed *had* to be dealt with.

She opened her door and carefully stepped out into the hall. She looked back over to her parents' room, hoping that she could tell where her dad was so she was better prepared, but the door was open and the lights were out. Meaning that they likely weren't in the room. Which also meant that dinner was probably done and her dad got the early jump on her.

The walk from her room to the living room took forever, but that was when Makoto noticed the voices. One belonged to her dad. One belonged to Mitsuru. The other was familiar, but not enough. Fuuka? They were talking about the dark web. A hit. Medjed…

“Your family is now in real danger, Akihiko.”

Makoto tried to make herself as small as possible. She had no idea what was going on, but Mitsuru didn’t sound too happy. She also didn’t use the word *danger* often enough in conversations for Makoto to think it wasn’t all that serious. What in the world did her dad get involved with this time?

“Something wrong?”

Makoto almost screamed, but her hand came up to cover her mouth before it could escape. She quickly turned around and found her mom trying to contain her laughter. “You scared me!”

“And you’re blocking the way.”

Her head fell to her chest, but she could no longer make out what was happening between her dad and Mitsuru. Her heart was beating too hard from her mother scaring her and that was all she heard. But, in her silence, her mother leaned over towards her with a concerned look on her face.

“Are you okay?”

She could tell her mom, right? “I-It’s nothing…”

She might be angry with her dad, but she also knew that him and her mom were still on the fence with each other. She didn’t want to add anymore tension to their lives and have that be the final straw and her dad left. If she told her mom that her dad was treating her like a *child* , her mom might get angry and they would argue and yell and really get divorced…

“I want you to talk to me, Makoto.”

“I-I just…” She stopped to think about what she was doing. Her mom was going to snap at her dad. When she snapped at him, he was going to leave. He would never talk to either of them again.

“Oh.” Makoto glanced at her mom, confused as to the surprise in her tone. But her eyes were not on her, but behind her. “I didn’t realize we were having company.”

Makoto turned back around to find her dad and Mitsuru and Fuuka standing in the living room. Her dad didn't say anything as he threw himself onto the couch and promptly buried his face in his hands. Mitsuru sighed and took a step towards both of them.

"We don't plan to stay. I apologize for coming over unannounced."

Her mom straightened her back while Makoto tried to figure out what was happening. "It's not a problem. Is everything okay?"

Mitsuru and Fuuka both looked over at her dad before he started pulling on his hair in the silence. "Someone wants me dead. They want all of you dead! They put a fucking *hit* out on me!"

It was rare for her dad to be this angry in front of her, her mom, and friends. Her mom wasn't intimidated as much as she was. "Aki, stop that."

He stood from his seat and glared at her mom. "Five hundred million. That's how badly someone wants me gone! Or any of you! All the while, Makoto keeps diving into more damn trouble with questionable friends and how the hell am I supposed to trust *any* of you?"

Makoto's hands tightened at her side while she felt her mom place a hand on her shoulder. "Aki, you need to calm down."

He fell back into the couch like he had lost the strength to stand. Mitsuru turned to Fuuka and nodded her head. "We are monitoring the situation as it comes, but for now, I would advise you all to use some caution." Her dark eyes landed on her. "Be careful who you trust, Makoto."

She bit her tongue, knowing it wouldn't do her any good to stand up to Mitsuru, so she quietly agreed with a quick nod. Both Mitsuru and Fuuka said their farewells and left before Makoto thought the tension would swallow everyone up.

Strangely enough, the rest of the evening passed in silence. The one or two conversations her mom tried to start were quickly killed off by her dad's attitude. Makoto didn't even finish her dinner she

was so upset with him, put her meal away in the fridge, then stormed off to her room.

She got even more upset when she didn't see a message from Ren.

It was too early to try and fall asleep, but that was the only thing she thought she *could* do. She wouldn't talk to her dad or even be in the same room as him. She didn't want to bother Ren with her anger and her troubles. She was tempted to ask Mitsuru what was going on, but thought better of it when she reminded herself that the older woman told her to be more cautious of who she trusted.

Did she think Ren and her friends were *bad* people? Did her dad? Why?

There was a light knock on her door that brought her out of her thoughts. She shot a glance over to her clock on her nightstand to see how long she had been off in her own little world. Two hours had somehow passed since she left dinner. Had she been thinking for that long?

"Makoto."

She heaved a sigh of relief when she heard her mother's voice through the door, but that didn't mean her dad wasn't with her. Hopefully not. Still together, but not at this very moment.

It felt like it took her another two hours to cross her room to open her door. Her mom wore a calm expression, a light smile, but Makoto saw the question in her eyes. "Yes?"

"Can we talk?"

She figured it would be rude to tell her no, given that her mom was likely her only friend right now, so she opened the door enough to let her inside. Her mom took a seat at the foot of her bed and patted the spot next to her. Makoto closed the door and followed suit.

"Do you know why your dad is angry with you?"

It was a question Makoto could have answered easily, but there was something *off* in her mother's tone. She wasn't asking because she

didn't know, but rather, because she did and she wanted Makoto to know.

And it upset her. "He thinks I'm stupid and I'm going to get myself into trouble again." She huffed angrily as she folded her arms. "He doesn't trust me. Or Ren! I don't know why!"

She felt a hand land on her knee. It was hard to tell if her mom was mad at her too, or if she was mad at her dad. "Makoto, I know you're growing up, and that you want to do everything on your own. But sometimes I wish you would stop and think about what you're doing."

Her eyes narrowed. "I *do* know what I'm doing. I wasn't going to let any guy snag me there. I had Ren with me."

"Across the street, Makoto."

She opened her mouth to protest, but nothing came out. Her mother's hand lifted from her knee and her eyes fell to her lap. "Your dad worries about you. And when he catches you walking around in a part of town you know you're not supposed to be in, he's going to get upset."

"I knew what I was doing!"

"Do you know what happens there, Makoto?"

Did she? Sure. She heard about those energetic men on the street that tried to get pretty girls to work for them. She heard about some usage of drugs. She heard about the love hotels. But how was that so different from any other district? Just because her dad worked there?

"I know there's a little bit of crime here and there, but it's not any different from Shibuya or Roppongi or-,"

"Your dad doesn't like to talk about the cases he's worked on, but he doesn't have to for me to see what it does to him." She watched as her mom took a deep breath, then continued. "I didn't even ask him to talk about work for the longest time. But there was a time when you were six or seven that he wouldn't let you do anything on your

own and I had to ask him what he was doing. You didn't seem to mind the attention, but he would stay in your room long after you fell asleep, sometimes even until you woke up, make sure you got to and from school okay, then do it all over again for weeks."

"Oh." She vaguely remembered the time period her mom was talking about. But, she was always with her dad. She loved Dad. He always played with her, fought with her, let her watch Buchimaru when her mom told her to go to bed…

"I finally cornered him and asked him what the hell was wrong with him after he put you to bed one night. And he told me. He told me that he was finding more and more girls your age being sold to the black market as sex slaves. These girls were young, usually runways or those who found comfort in the white lies these men sold them. He had to interrogate men who kidnapped them, who raped them, who *thrived* off the power from *owning* them. Most of the older teenagers he managed to rescue told him they never thought they would have fallen for the wad of cash until it was too late. The men were nice, friendly, giving them whatever they wanted for the first several meetings until they grew *comfortable* with them. *That* is how they caught them."

Makoto held her hands together in her lap tightly. While she figured on some level crimes like that happened, she never really thought they *did* . They were just plot points in the mystery thrillers or yakuza movies that she loved.

"This is why he worries," her mom said quietly. "Because when he saw a victim, he saw you and your sister. So when he sees you roaming around in that very part of town, that's exactly what he's thinking. That he's going to get called to a crime scene and this time, it's going to be *you."*

"But…I-I…I just wanted to help someone. I wouldn't have spoken to any of those guys."

"So why are you putting yourself in that situation to begin with? How do you know those men wouldn't have come up with another way to lure you in? How do you know they would have let you walk away?"

“Well…”

“You don’t, Makoto.” Her mom pushed herself off the bed while Makoto kept her eyes on the floor. “So stop telling me that you *know* what you’re doing when you have no idea. Because if you truly did, you would see the damage you’re doing to your father and you would *stop* .”

She didn’t try to stop her mom when she left her room, the door closing softly behind her. Makoto sat on her bed, her eyes still glued to the ground, her mother’s words bouncing around in her head. Was she in the wrong? Was she in over her head? Or was her mom being a little paranoid and didn’t trust her either? And even if she was right, that Kabukicho was a dangerous place, what did that say for the student that may or may not have been caught in one of those schemes? Didn’t that mean she had to do something?

Maybe Ren was right. She should probably talk to her dad about it. He always took his job seriously. He would probably put her concern first if she asked him to look into it. Or maybe he would let her go with him so she could watch him talk to people? There would be no harm in that, right?

But her sleep was plagued with nightmares. She relived that terrifying afternoon in Kaneshiro’s club, but instead of her dad getting shot in the leg, they shot him in the head and he didn’t get back up. She was in turn handed over to some slime ball for a chunk of change. She felt hands on her. She heard laughter as she tried to fight off the hands, but failed miserably. She was in pain. She tried to scream, but no one heard her. Not Ren. Not her mom. Not Mitsuru. Not her dad.

“Makoto.”

She shot up in her bed, her breaths coming in short gasps while tears streaked her face. A pair of hands on her shoulders shook her gently, and she blinked and turned to her side.

“Are you alright?”

Her vision blurred before she threw herself at her dad, the same

person she was at odds with, the same person who was *always* there for her, no matter how angry he was at her. “I-I…I’m sorry!”

She sobbed into his chest while his arms wrapped around her back like a safety blanket. She always felt safe with him. “You’re okay,” he told her through her cries. “I won’t let anybody hurt you.”

Whether or not he *knew* why she was crying, she didn’t want to ask. It was embarrassing enough that she was crying because she was scared from a nightmare. When was the last time she had one so bad that it woke her parents and they had to comfort her like this?

“I-I didn’t mean to wake you.” She wiped at her eyes as she leaned back in his arms. “I’m sorry.”

He grabbed her chin and forced her to look at him when she tried to look away. “I want you to tell me why you were in Kabukicho.”

Images from her nightmare, from her mother’s story, started to flood her mind again. “I…I heard a student might be working in a shady establishment. So, I wanted to see if I could find them.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

She couldn’t keep her eyes on his. “Because I thought you would be too busy.”

“Why was Amamiya with you?”

“B-Because…because I asked him to come with me.” He released her, but the moment he did, she dropped her head. “He tried to stop me. He really did.”

She heard him sigh in mild disappointment. The tears started to burn at her eyes again. “I asked him to keep you out of trouble a few days ago. And then he tries to *lie* his way out of telling me he’s with you in a place he knew he shouldn’t be at. *That’s* why I was upset with him. And now you both have a ways to go to prove to me that I can trust you again. Especially now with the…”

He tapered off, but Makoto knew what he was going to say. “Because of the threat?”

Instead of responding to her, he put his arm around her shoulder and pulled her back against him. “If anything were to ever happen to you, or to your sister, I don’t know what I would do. So please, Makoto, please stay away from Shinjuku. And tell me *before* you do something like this again so I *know.”*

“I just want you to trust me.”

He held on to her tighter. “And I want you to *listen* . It’s hard enough knowing that someone would *kill* you for money instead of just following you around. So in order for me to trust you, I need you to trust *me.”*

One of her hands curled around the edge of her blanket. “But you don’t want to trust Ren.”

“You’re right. I don’t,” he stated with no hesitation. But he wouldn’t let her pull away from him. “I don’t want him to take you away from me.”

This time, she flattened her palms against his chest and pushed off of him. “He’s not going to take me away from you. You’re always going to be my dad. You’re always going to be the person I want to train with. But that doesn’t mean you should hate him because he’s my friend.”

He released his breath with a laugh. “I don’t *hate* him. But everything that’s been happening started when he showed up here. It makes me curious. I don’t have all the answers I need to fully clear him yet. That, and I’ve heard that he said I was dating my daughter and cheating on my wife, so that doesn’t help either.”

It was her turn to smile. “Does this mean you and Mom are going to be okay?”

He hesitated for a moment, then she felt his weight against her like he was tired. “I love your mother, Makoto. And I love you, and your sister.” He gave her a brief squeeze before he dropped his arms. “And I will do everything I can to keep all of you safe. Even if that means I have to trust your boyfriend. For now.”

Makoto waited for him to chuckle, to grin at her like he told her a joke, but he didn't. "W-We…we aren't *dating!"*

"Oh." She would have laughed at him had it been any other situation. "I just assumed you didn't want to tell me that either."

She took a deep breath, then told him, "I would tell you if I was ever dating someone. Or…Mom. And Mom wouldn't be able to keep it a secret."

"Yeah, alright," he said with a hint of sarcasm in his voice. "Are you feeling better now?"

She nodded her head as she lowered herself back under the covers, suddenly realizing just how tired she was. "Thank you, Dad."

He brushed a few strands of hair out of her eyes, then stood from the bed. "I don't ever want you to be afraid to talk to me, Makoto. Even when I'm angry with you. Sometimes, I don't know that what I'm thinking is wrong until you or your mother call me out on it. Don't ever be afraid to tell me, okay?"

She nodded again, but before he could walk out of her room, she stopped him. "Um, Dad?" When she had his attention, she suddenly felt bashful. "Even if I get a boyfriend, you'll always be my favorite guy."

His smile made her heart warm. "Thank you, Makoto."

And that feeling kept all of her nightmares away for the rest of the night.

Chapter 79

Chapter 79

He told her he loved her at least a hundred times that night. Every time she released his lips anyway, which wasn't often, nor was he free for very long. She could sense his hunger in the way he pressed her against him, the impatience he had when he struggled to pull her shirt over her head, and when he finally did, he attacked her neck with a vengeance.

He only broke away from her when he pushed her down on the bed. "I love you, Minako."

She didn't say anything to him and grabbed him by the back of his neck and pulled him back to her. It was always impressive how sometimes the mere *sight* of him could turn her back into a love-sick twenty year old girl again. Given the hell she had put him through that week, that year, the past couple years even, he could still do this to her. She could never get enough of him. Ever. No matter how many times she tried or thought she succeeded, it was all a fresh slate when he pulled her into his arms with a kiss that left her breathless and *dying* for him.

But just as suddenly as he came on to her, he stopped. He dropped his head to her shoulder while still supporting his weight as he hovered over her. He was quiet, which made her worry that she had done something wrong, or he was thinking about something she *had* done wrong in the past. She lifted her hands to cradle his face so he would look at her when she spoke to him.

"What's wrong?"

There was a look of pain on his face for half a second, but then it was gone. He at least dropped a quick kiss to her lips before he rolled over and fell next to her. "Sorry."

Minako turned on her side and held her head up with one of her hands. "Why are you sorry?"

He leaned back into the pillow and rubbed his face with both hands. “I…I just wanted to lay here with you. And I guess I got a little ahead of myself.”

His innocence sometimes made her hurt, but she found herself smiling at him. “There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“I know.” His voice was quiet, but his arms fell back to his sides. “I’m sorry.”

Instead of pushing him into either restarting what *she* wanted or asking him *again* why he was apologizing, she chose to make herself comfortable against him. She had to remind herself that she had hurt him, and he wasn’t someone who healed quickly. While she would love to jump on top of him and tell him as much with actions rather than words, he was with her, he wasn’t going anywhere, and he told her he loved her.

“I love you, Aki.”

His eyes found hers. His arm snaked around her shoulders and his hand rested on her hip. He gave her another kiss to the forehead and held her tightly against his chest. “Thank you.”

At first, Minako was surprised he was thanking her for saying it. Until she realized that he had told her over and over again and never *once* did she say it back. Was that why he stopped?

She always told Makoto that Akihiko needed to be reminded time and time again that she loved him. How could she think that wouldn’t apply to her? “I love you. And I’m so happy that you’re staying here, with me, tonight.” She dropped her other arm over him and pulled him closer to her as she buried her face in his chest. “I love you. I promise. I know I don’t say it as often as I should, and I’m sorry. But I will tell you every single day and-,”

“Minako, stop.” Akihiko shifted so he could lay on his side and propped himself up with his arm. “I don’t want you to feel like I’m forcing you to say it.”

Forcing? The impact of the thought made her sit up in the bed. “I’m

not feeling forced to say it, Aki. I want to say it. I want you to *know* .” She caught his frown and her heart dropped to her stomach. “You might not want to hear this, but you tend to need a reminder. And I know you still hold the fact that I wanted to leave you over my head, so I need to do this.”

Akihiko fell back onto the bed as if the small argument had drained him of energy. He didn’t say anything to her for the longest time until she grew too uncomfortable in the silence. “Why are you acting like this?”

Instead of a verbal answer, he turned over on the bed so his back was facing her. She felt a pang of annoyance at the action, him *running away* , but before she could tell him as much, he spoke up.

“What if telling me you hated me was the last thing you ever said to me?”

Both his words and his tone brought all her thoughts to a stop. She knew he would need more time to forgive her completely. But what made her hurt the most was that he was *right* . Akihiko had been put in the hospital more times in the past year than he ever had in all the years leading up to it. Every time, he was there longer and longer. He wasn’t young anymore. He couldn’t bounce back like he used to.

What if she told him she hated him, or wanted to leave him for good, and he walked out and didn’t come back?

“I’m sorry,” he whispered quietly, almost to the point she didn’t hear him. “It’s just…with someone wanting me *dead* , it made me think. I didn’t mean to bring this back up.”

Minako lowered herself to rest against his side, one arm draping around him and her head landing on his shoulder. “I’m glad you’re telling me this. Because you’re right. I would never want the last thing I said to you to be that I hated you. Not that I want you to go out and get yourself hurt or killed, but…”

She tried to finish her thought, but her mind started to turn against her. She remembered exactly how she felt when Mitsuru had called her to let her know Akihiko had been stabbed. She remembered

exactly how she felt when Mitsuru called her and let her know he had been shot. She remembered exactly how she felt while she watched him struggle to battle off whoever was trying to *kill* him in whatever world Makoto and Ren had traveled to.

“Minako…”

She wiped at her eyes, then used her hands to push him flat on his back so she could lay against him more comfortably. “I love you,” she said quietly. “I love you so much…”

It was the last thing she said to him before she closed her eyes and let his fingers in her hair gently coax her to sleep. She hadn’t realized how tired she was until the soft beating of his heart calmed her enough so she could sleep. It was peaceful. No nightmares. No blood. No dead familiar faces.

But when she woke up, refreshed and feeling like her old self again, she realized Akihiko was gone. He probably had to go to work, but that didn’t stop the slight twist of her heart because she couldn’t tell him anything before he left.

At least the last thing she would have said to him was *I love you* …

It was hard to push herself out of bed, but she rubbed at her eyes, suddenly missing the warmth left behind by Akihiko. Her stomach grumbled, which helped her get moving, because if she was hungry, Makoto was probably hungry, too…

She heard the door to the room open and it startled her enough that she almost fell back onto the bed. But then she saw Akihiko, dressed in his usual work attire, holding a plate in one hand and a glass of something in the other.

He clearly didn’t expect her to be awake. “Oh. I…Did I wake you?”

She had to exhale a laugh or she thought she was going to explode. “You brought me breakfast?”

It wasn’t uncommon for him to bring her breakfast in bed, especially after an argument, or a long weekend where he was away from her. Regardless, it never failed to take her breath away.

“You were supposed to be asleep.”

She laughed again as he placed the glass and the plate down on the nightstand next to her. “Please tell me you didn’t make this.”

He scoffed like she had insulted him. “It’s not hard to put bread in a toaster and cook it.”

“No, it’s not,” she told him through her quiet laughter. It felt good to laugh like this. “But you’d still find a way to burn it.” While he pouted at her barb, she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him on the cheek. “Thank you.”

She really wanted to thank him in *other* ways, but he had to go to work soon and she knew better than to think she could make it *quick* . She found comfort just being next to him, enjoying the motion of his hands on her back moving up and down her spine.

Then, “Makoto made breakfast this morning.”

And she laughed again. “I guess putting bread into a toaster is still challenging for you.”

He ignored her as best he could as he dropped a quick kiss to her lips. “I have to go. But next time I’ll show you that I *can* cook something…”

She reached for him again with her lips, then she leaned her head into his chest. “I love you, Aki.”

He gave her a powerful hug before he released her. “I love you, too.”

He was out the door after another quick kiss and Minako slowly made her way back to the bed. Her eyes landed on the simple breakfast *Makoto* had made, but even if it was simple, it was thoughtful, and she was hungry. However, instead of eating the meal in the silence of her room, she carried the plate back into the kitchen where her daughter was moving about cleaning up after herself.

“So. I take it you spoke to your father?”

Makoto came to a stop, but she didn't turn around until another few minutes passed. "Oh. Y-Yeah. Kind of."

Minako pulled out one of the chairs at the table and took a seat. "Kind of?"

Her daughter remained silent until she came to face her. "I…I had a nightmare last night, and he came in to help me get over it."

She was aware that Akihiko had gone to talk to Makoto, but he didn't tell her she had a nightmare. Makoto used to have terrors as a child and he had been the one to calm her down so she could sleep again. Given all the family drama in the past few weeks, Minako wasn't surprised Makoto had one, but more curious to know where it had come from and how that would excuse Makoto's behavior the other night.

"I dreamt that I was in Kaneshiro's club again, but they killed Dad. And I was alone with a bunch of creepy guys and they were trying to hurt me and no one would come help even though I was screaming and crying and-,"

"Makoto."

She said her name sharply enough that it got Makoto to stop retreating into herself and look at her. Minako sighed after a few minutes, a pang of guilt creeping into her heart for telling Makoto about Akihiko's line of work. Perhaps that was why *he* never told any of them.

"Honey, I didn't mean to scare you. I just wanted you to realize the game you were playing. Your father is trained for this. You're not." She pushed herself away from the table, her breakfast not all that appetizing now. "I know you don't like us treating you as a child. But right now, your father is going to be more strict on you, where you are, and who you're with. Because he loves you. So please, listen to him. Okay?"

It was going to be a hard few days, or weeks, or however long it was going to take Mitsuru and Fuuka to figure out where this "hit" was coming from. But in her mind, nothing really changed. Akihiko was a

cop. He was bound to have enemies who wanted him dead every second of every day. The threat on their lives had just made it more obvious. And personal. Regardless, Akihiko was not about to take it lightly like it was just any other day. She needed Makoto to understand that while sometimes Akihiko was a bit overbearing, he didn't do it without a purpose. Insignificant at some times, but never because he wanted to be hard on them.

Oddly enough, Makoto wiped at her eyes and nodded her head. Then, her lips turned upwards into a small smile. "He told me he would be willing to trust Ren while all of this worked itself out."

The mention of Makoto's "person of interest" brought a smile to Minako's face as well. "I'm sure he would approve of Ren being your boyfriend once it's all cleared up."

Makoto's face darkened. "M-Mom!" She shook her head to hide it. "D-Do you really think Dad would like him?"

"I think your dad likes him already." Minako walked up to Makoto and placed a hand on her shoulder. "The fact he was angry with him for being with you and lying to him proves that much."

Makoto's eyes narrowed. "How does being mad at him prove that?"

"Because he cares, Makoto." She gave a gentle pat to her shoulder before she turned back to the table. Now that the previous tension had been cleared up a bit, she could eat. "If he didn't get mad or approach you about what you were both doing, then he wouldn't care if you got into trouble or got hurt."

Eventually, Makoto carried her own plate over to the table next to her and sat down. It was a fairly peaceful meal, neither one of them speaking too much, but the conversation steered more towards Ren and their thoughts on him rather than the negative and frustrating parts of life. Minako took notice of how many times Makoto blushed while she spoke, the tone in which she talked about Ren, the way she had a subtle smile on her face that she may have missed had she not known her well. All of it elated her, thrilled to finally see one daughter interested in a boy and a possible future with said boy. Especially Ren. She really liked Ren.

“I just don’t think he’s very happy with me right now.”

The comment drastically changed the atmosphere and Minako had to laugh to keep it light. “Every couple is going to fight, Makoto.” Her smile widened when her face turned bright red again. “It’s all about pulling through, being patient, and understanding. Which I’m sure Ren possesses in spades.”

“You really like him.”

The slight turn in the conversation caused her to pause. “Well, yes, I do. I feel like I have a connection with him. Well, I guess that all makes sense now,” she said with a laugh. “He kind of *is* me.”

Makoto stared back at her in confusion. “He *is* you? What does that mean?”

“He’s a wild card.”

Her statement got Makoto to fumble her chopsticks in her hand. “Y-You *know?”* Then, she turned to her with a horrified look. “D-Did that…does that mean… *you* were one?”

Minako took half a second to curse herself for saying anything at all. While Makoto was fully aware that Akihiko had a persona, she did not know about *her* . At least, not having multiple ones. “I guess I should have told you.”

Makoto continued to stare back at her in awestruck horror. “Y-You… you’re serious?”

And now she was going to have to tell her the story she never wanted Makoto to know. “I am serious. I just can’t prove it to you because I don’t have them anymore. I can’t talk to Igor or Theo, but, Ren said he would try for me.”

Makoto’s eyes fell to her plate. “W-Why don’t you have them anymore?”

She really didn’t want to talk about it. It must have shown on her face, since Makoto’s reaction went from intrigue to concern. However, if she expected Makoto to be open and honest with them,

then she needed to be open and honest with her.

“I honestly don’t know what happened. I just woke up after a terrorizing fight and had nothing. I had to learn to live with it.”

Makoto eyed her from across the table as if to tell her to give more details, but she placed her chopsticks back down on their holder and held her hands on her lap. “Oh. I-I’m sorry…”

“No, I should have told you a long time ago. I just didn’t want you to freak out.” She smiled sadly as her eyes fell to her plate in front of her. “I promised your dad I wouldn’t talk about it because he knows I don’t like thinking about it. But I really just don’t know what happened.” Her hands dropped to her sides and they tightened into fists. “Now that I know Ren has the ability to speak to Igor, I want to know. Maybe it was the price I had to pay for my life. Maybe it was so someone else could play the role. Maybe it was because of a million reasons, but I want to *know.”*

The room fell quiet. Minako took a deep breath in through her nose to calm her racing mind. While she had spoken calmly, Makoto likely picked up on her tension. It was frustrating not having answers, but she had lived for how many years without them? Why all of the sudden did it matter *now?* What would she tell Igor, or Theodore? *Hey thanks for bringing me back and all, but what the fuck?*

“Your life?”

Makoto’s voice was so hushed and timid that she nearly missed it. When she looked back up at her, she saw the nervousness on her face. Minako leaned back in her chair and exhaled deeply. “One of the reasons we didn’t tell you about our personas was because it wasn’t a wonderful experience. It’s actually terrifying thinking about you following in our footsteps. I never would have wished this life on anyone, and I’m sure your father would say the same.”

“But you got to meet Dad and all your other friends, right?”

Minako offered a weak smile. “Not everything was bad. And while I would do it all over again if that meant I got to keep them all in my life, I wouldn’t want anyone else to have to suffer like we all did. I

can't tell you how many nights I had nightmares. I can't tell you how many nights I didn't sleep. But through it all, we fought, we succeeded, and we let the experience make us stronger. However, if you and your friends are headed down the same road, I want you to stop. I don't want you to fight. I don't want you to have this weight on your shoulders. You're eighteen, Makoto. This should be *our* job; not yours."

Makoto gave her a better smile, one of strength and confidence that she swore she saw in Akihiko when he was her age. "I know you both worry about me. No matter what I do, I know you will. But, someone once told me we were given this power for a reason. I feel stronger. I was able to save my father. I've been able to feel like I have a purpose in life now."

She was hit with a wave of pride as she looked back at her little girl. Makoto may not know the horrors she had to deal with once *Death* came knocking on their door, but even if she did, or was going to, she had the heart to rise above it. It was terrifying to think about, Makoto and her friends living the life her and her friends had, but their strength of heart was what allowed them to pull through. Makoto was that version of Akihiko that Minako had needed when she felt like she had *lost* .

"I see a lot of your father in you, right now," she told her with tears brimming in her eyes. "He was always my greatest support when I thought everything was falling apart. And I hope you keep being that support for him, for me, and for your friends, and that you know we would all be there for you as well."

Makoto turned her head away from her to try and hide the light dusting of pink on her cheeks, but before she could say anything, there was a light knock on the door. Makoto quickly turned to her, neither one of them expecting company, and her first thought was that someone was there to *hurt* them.

"You stay here." She pushed away from the table and slowly walked to the door to give her time to think of a strategy. But, before she could reach the door, she felt Makoto come up behind her.

"I told you to wait."

“I know,” Makoto whispered. “But I can help you fight if we need to.”

She wanted to tell her to go back to her room and prepare to call her father, but the knocking persisted. In fact, the longer she tried to ignore it, the louder it got.

After another minute, knowing Makoto at least had her phone on her, Minako reached out and opened the door.

“It’s about damn time!”

“Mitsuru-san has sent us here to offer you and your family protection.”

“Mina-tan!”

She was bombarded with a hoard of emotions and questions and *everything* before Junpei barreled into her. For someone who didn’t look so strong, he sure could make her feel like he could break her in half. Yukari managed to push Aigis into the apartment and shut the door while Minako managed to pry an overly-ecstatic Junpei off of her.

“What are you guys doing here?”

Yukari scoffed at her. “Oh, are we *not* allowed to come see you?”

“We will not be leaving.” Aigis pushed herself past Junpei and Minako couldn’t contain her desire to reach out and hug her. She had missed them all tremendously, but Aigis would always be special. She was the one who watched out for her, who was the mother-figure she needed when she needed a mother. Aigis didn’t hate, didn’t judge, didn’t belittle her, even when Minako felt like she was too hard on Aigis herself.

“It is good to see you again, Minako.”

Aigis returned the embrace for a second or two, but then Minako pulled back before she became too emotional. “It’s so nice to see you all again.”

Yukari and Junpei both smiled at her while Aigis turned her attention

to Makoto. “You are Mini-Minako.”

The rest of them laughed at the comparison while Makoto took a step closer to her. “Um. W-Who are you guys?”

Minako ushered her friends into the living room for more space, to which Junpei was the first to unceremoniously fall to the couch. Yukari rolled her eyes at him and took her seat on the adjacent chair beside Aigis.

“You remember how earlier we were talking about my time in your shoes with my friends?” She watched Makoto’s eyes travel from the guests in the living room back to her eyes. When she slowly nodded her head, Minako held out her hand with a smile.

“It’s time you met the rest of them.”

Chapter 80

Chapter 80

No matter how many times she heard their name, it always made her *sick* .

“Wow! The Phantom Thieves are so awesome!”

“They stopped the cyber threat without unveiling their identity! That’s so cool!”

“Heh. We should put them in charge of Japan’s safety and security.”

Sae slammed the door to her office the second she was inside. While it was still uncertain what happened with Medjed and the threat (if it had been a threat at all), the general population didn’t even *care* . The *Phantom Thieves* were *heroes,* doing *her* job better than *she* could, and now it was strike three for her. (Kamoshida was a free shot.)

She barely managed to throw herself in her seat before a pounding knock echoed in the room. Sae didn’t need to answer it before four familiar faces barged in.

“How the hell did they pull this off?”

“Why haven’t you made an arrest yet?”

“This is becoming an embarrassment!”

Sae gave them all a few minutes to rant and rave, not necessarily *at* her, but she clenched her hands beneath her desk at some of the *obvious* insults.

“I’ve had enough of this!”

She tried not to scoff at him, but the second the police commissioner’s eyes landed on her, she narrowed her own. “We’ve been working on this case for almost two months and we have

nothing ."

He returned her scowl with one she assumed he thought was more intimidating. "No. You *have* something: a suspect. You're just choosing to cover it up!"

This time, she chuckled at him. "If I had a suspect, I would have arrested someone by now."

"You're too soft to be in your position, and now, it could cost us the trust of the nation."

She was pretty sure her nails broke the skin of her palm as the politician hot shot shook his head like he was so disappointed in her. Like she really cared about his opinion. What did *he* know about the law and enforcing it? All he did was hide behind his desk and his money and his "powerful" friends whenever his hands were dirty…

"Sae-san, you know what you have to do." Akechi came up to stand in front of her desk with a pathetic look on his face. She wanted to slap him. She might have had her boss not been in the room with them.

"You all know I'm open for suggestions. Being *vague* isn't going to help. And heaven forbid I become any *softer!"*

The room fell deadly silent. She was pretty sure she heard her own heartbeat in her ears. The police commissioner came to stand next to Akechi and dropped both of his hands to her desk. She looked down at them once she realized he had a piece of paper in one of his hands: an arrest warrant.

Suddenly, she felt sick to her stomach.

"I'm tired of you defending him. We will arrest Sanada tomorrow when he shows up for work."

It took far more strength than she ever thought it would to keep herself rooted to her chair and not to physically assault the man in front of her. How *dare* he try and take her job away from her. This was *her* call to make, not his. She hadn't even been *consulted* on the issue. She had threatened to arrest Akihiko a while back, sure,

but the longer she thought about the role he *could* have played, the less and less sense everything started to make.

Did he know something? Maybe. Would she get a straight answer from him if she arrested him? No. She knew better than to try and do the same to Makoto.

She needed more time.

“Do you realize how *insulting* this is?” She pushed her chair back and came to her feet, her palms on the desk to keep her steady. “This is *my* case. *I* will be the one to make the call to arrest someone.”

The director sighed from the back of the room. It annoyed her. “Niijima-san, we cannot deny the possibility that he is somehow involved with these cases. He’s not the type of person to have a friendly ‘chat’ with us, so this is the next best option.”

Her hands smacked the top of the desk. “And what evidence do you have that *I* don’t?”

The commissioner produced a file and threw it in front of her. “We’ll start with Kamoshida. He assaults him over what, we don’t even know. Then Kamoshida magically shows up at the station, speaks *to him* , and confesses? Then he follows that delinquent Sakamoto to Kaneshiro’s club, that he *legally* owns, and the workers try to tell him to leave. Which he does not. To which he assaults several *other* men, only to have Kaneshiro turn himself in almost a month later?”

Sae’s hands curled in their place. “Please explain to me how getting *shot* , *twice* , was not included in your report.” She held up one of her hands to silence his retort. “I would also like you to explain to me where this connection is with Madarame. And Sanada is a *policeman* , not a hacker. So I would also like you to tell me how you think he could have stopped Medjed’s attack.”

The room fell silent once again, but there was palpable tension that physically *crushed* her. However, it was motivating. They had nothing. She knew it. It made her feel powerful. “Why do you think I haven’t had him arrested before? Do you think I’m *stupid?”*

“You’ve had people arrested for much less.”

Her eyes turned to Akechi, who’s hand lifted to his chin as he appeared deep in thought. “If I’m not mistaken, a few of your victorious cases didn’t even have evidence, but you do a superb job instilling fear into people when provoked.”

Now she was seeing red. “What are you trying to say?”

“I mean no disrespect, Sae-san, I’m just trying to understand. I figured someone like you would see the connections we have presented, but, perhaps you have a point as well.” He appeared to mull over his thoughts, then met her eyes again before he spoke. “I’m honestly surprised you’re not using your supposed hatred towards him as a means to throw him behind bars.”

She had nothing to say to that. She wanted to snap at him, to remind him that she *did* hate Akihiko, but she also didn’t want to fall into a trap Akechi had been trying to set. He clearly wanted the arrest, clearly thought *she* would want the arrest as well, but hopefully she had given him something to think about.

The rest of the room did *not* agree. “If you’re covering up for his crimes *again* , you’re going to find yourself in a jail cell with all the psychopaths you’ve arrested.” The police commissioner leaned in so his face was in her personal space. “I hope they rip you apart in there.”

Before she could say anything to him, he grabbed the warrant and stormed out of the room. The politician again shook his head and gave her a pathetic look. “I’ve heard good things about Sanada. But good cops don’t stay good forever. Don’t let his antics and good behavior fool you. Seek the justice this city needs you to.”

Soon, he was out the door as well, leaving a more comfortable group of colleagues behind. Sae fell back into her chair, their words echoing loudly in her mind. She wasn’t given much time to *think* before the director sighed and rubbed the back of his head.

“Niijima-san, I need you to catch these Phantom Thieves before they threaten someone else. I don’t care how you do it. However, I will be

forced to remove you from the case if you fail to bring me anything soon." He looked directly at her and she felt the walls collapse around her. "Do you understand?"

It was hard to talk. "Yes, sir."

"Good," he replied, lifting his arm to check his wristwatch. "I have to meet with the press. Do not let your country down."

And then he was gone.

If only she could do something about Akechi. "Sanada means a lot to you, doesn't he?"

If he was in reaching distance, she would have thrown him out the window. "Do you understand the backlash that would happen if we arrested him for something he *might* be guilty about?"

Akechi shrugged his shoulders. "This is about justice. These Phantom Thieves are terrorists and vigilantes. They must be stopped before they kill."

She crossed her arms. "You keep referring to the Phantom Thieves as *them* . But yet, you think that arresting *one* person would stop them?"

A smug smile came to her face when Akechi faltered for a few minutes. "I hate to say this Sae-san, but…one of the reasons I agreed to the warrant was because I fear Sanada has taken an interest in your sister."

That got her attention. "Wh-What?"

"I see them together quite frequently. I heard that he not only took Sakamoto to Kaneshiro's establishment, but took your sister as well. One night, she was roaming around the courthouse, but he came to pick her up and escort her home. Any time I mention her, he gets very tense and I can tell he's trying to figure out how to derail the topic."

Sae wanted to take his information with a grain of salt, but that one grain buried itself beneath her skin and she was on *fire* . So *now*

Akihiko wanted to be a father. In public. With *Makoto* . What the hell did Makoto do to deserve his attention like this? Charge into Kaneshiro's club after she had warned her sister he was *dangerous?* Wander around and look for something else to get into so he could bail her out?

But of course, he would never know about her troubles, her nightmares, the threats on *her* life, because he didn't *care* .

"Sae-san?"

She blinked and the room became dull and brown again. She leaned into one of her hands propped up on the desk. "I'll find a connection between Sanada and Madarame. I'm sure he has some techie friends somewhere who could have had something to do with Medjed."

Akechi nodded his head and offered her a charming smile. "I hope for your sake, I'm mistaken in his intentions."

"Get out." Thankfully, Akechi didn't protest and in minutes, she was alone in her office. She immediately set her mind to work, trying to find a link between the actions of the Phantom Thieves, Madarame, and Akihiko. If she could find that connection, then she could stop sitting on the fence and make some headway in her case.

Hell, if she couldn't find it, hopefully there was something minor she could turn into something *bigger* .

Minutes of research turned into hours and into days. There was *nothing* . The only physical thing she could even use against Akihiko had been the altercation with Kamoshida. She knew enough about what happened with Kaneshiro because that was her *sister's* fault, but still. There was nothing, minus a few scuffles as a kid she didn't want to look into. There was not one other thing on his damn record she could use against him.

How the hell was that possible?

It irritated her immensely. Akihiko had been in the business long enough to *know* people who could wipe small time "problems" from

his record. Maybe even some not so small ones. He did have a bit of a temper from what she had heard. She knew if she spoke to his bosses, they would give her any and every little thing they could to nail him for good. They were likely her only option, seeing that his coworkers would riot if the arrest actually happened based off of what evidence they *didn't* have.

She'd rather avoid that.

But she was out of time. She was tired of the Phantom Thieves evading her. She was tired of people thinking she was incapable of doing her job. She was tired of feeling like her family was getting the better of her.

She would *not* be made a fool again.

The next morning, Sae set out to get whatever information she could. Truthful, lies, assumptions, she didn't care. Akechi had been correct. She had people arrested in the past for much less than what they had brought to her desk the other day. She had hesitated *only* because she knew what people would say, but she was ready to face that now.

Instead of meeting the brass at the police station and chancing a run in with Akihiko, she set up a meeting at her office. Sae had met with them before, usually at the police station, but she never met with them alone. The director would oftentimes be with her, or Akechi, or another member of their staff. However, this was a matter of pride. She couldn't let Akechi or anyone else know that she was cracking and resorting to underhanded tactics so she would *win* .

There was also a tiny voice in the back of her head telling her she was making a huge mistake.

The knock on her door brought her out of her thoughts and she was quick to come to her feet and approach the two leaders as they stepped into the room. They each took their respective seats, but there was something *off* about how they held themselves. Sae chose to ignore it at first and got right down to business.

"I would like you both to tell me about your time working with Akihiko

Sanada.”

The less intimidating one, Masami, if she remembered correctly, chuckled and it unnerved her. “I heard you denied the arrest warrant the commissioner wrote up.”

“That’s a pretty big deal, Niijima-san.”

Both of their eyes narrowed at her, but they each wore a crooked smile. It made it hard to find her voice. “And now I’m giving you both a chance to tell me what I could use to bring him in.”

“He’s taken an interest in your sister.”

Her response was stuck in her throat. She didn’t have time to get angry again. But then something else hit her. “How do you know my sister?”

Another round of chuckles. “We had a nice chat with her a while back.”

“What?”

“And it’s funny, because the more we talked about it, the more everything started to make sense.” The smile on their faces widened to the point it made her *sick* . “Children would do everything they could to protect their parents, wouldn’t you say?”

Her stomach turned enough that she had to swallow back the bile that came to her throat. “Excuse me?”

Both men gave each other a triumphant look before turning back to face her. “It would explain why you kept him out of prison for assaulting Kamoshida, and now, denying the arrest warrant.”

The insulting laugh she tried to spit out of her mouth sounded more like a surprised cough. “And that is all you have to assume he’s my father?”

“Your sister didn’t fare so well with our interrogation.”

Despite the reminder that she had to play this off as a joke, Sae

threw her hands to the desk and stood up quickly. “Perhaps I’ll have the both of you arrested for harassing my sister!”

“Ah, there it is,” Kishita, the more menacing of the two, said with amusement in his tone. “There’s Sanada’s snap temper.”

“I’d love to know how all this drama between the three of you ended up with you pretending to hate him.”

“I’d love to meet the woman that let him knock her up.”

She could have easily lunged at both of them, but she was suddenly thankful for the knock on the door. It distracted her guests and gave her enough time to compose herself before she physically harmed either one of them. The door creaked open in the silence as Sae fell back into her chair.

“Apologies for interrupting, but there’s someone here to see you with urgent business.”

Sae took another split second to calm herself, then nodded to the secretary. “Send them in.” She then glared at the two men in front of her. “We’re done here.”

They both smiled again. “We’ll make you a deal then. You arrest Sanada and lock him away for the crimes he’s committed against this great nation, and we will leave you *and* your sister alone.” Kishita extended his hand. “Deal?”

If she shook his hand, she was going to toss him out the door, through the window, *anything* to get him out of her face. But she did anyway. “I’ll have your warrant finalized by the end of the week. But don’t you *dare* think this is because of your disgusting assumption that he’s my father.”

He tried to pull his hand away, but Sae pulled against him enough that he had to catch himself on her desk. “Makoto could murder you in a heartbeat. Go after her again, and I’ll make sure she gets away with it.”

She was at least proud of herself for forcing them out of the room with an angry scowl on their faces, but for the few seconds she had

to herself, she pounded her fists against her desk. How *dare* they come at her about her sister. How *dare* they tell her that they *knew* Akihiko was her father. How *dare* they come into her meeting and leave her regretting asking them there at all!

“Niijima-san?”

In the presence of someone who didn’t deserve her anger, she forced in a deep breath to calm her rage. However, when she looked back up, she didn’t recognize the man standing before her.

“Can I help you?”

“I was actually wondering if I could help you.”

She didn’t have the strength to deal with another corrupt person willing to blackmail her, even if he seemed friendly enough. And he had gotten her out of a suffocating conversation before she did something stupid.

“And how would you do that?”

This stranger looked like he was comfortable around her, which was extremely bizarre because *no one* was comfortable around her. Not even her sister. He did, however, point and ask if he could take a seat before she nodded her head.

“I take it those men are bad news, huh?”

Sae crossed her arms over her chest, growing annoyed at how *friendly* this man was appearing to be with her. Almost like he *knew* her. “Do I know you?”

He laughed quietly. “Nah, I don’t think you know me. But I know you.”

Given her previous conversation, Sae immediately braced herself for whatever blackmail he had in store for her, but instead, he held up his hands as if offering her peace.

“Sorry. I guess I should stop freaking you out.” He leaned forward in his seat with a smile much warmer than the ones she could still see

on the cops' faces. "My name is Ken Amada. I'm here because Akihiko knew those men were headed your way and he didn't think anything good would come from it. So, here I am."

The mere mention of Akihiko sent her back into a rage. "If you think that you are doing him any favors by *helping* me, you are sadly mistaken." Her hands balled up on her desk. His smile turned more cocky and it *greatly* angered her. "Something funny?"

"I see a lot of myself in you. Kind of. The rage, I mean."

She narrowed her eyes. "The hell does that mean?"

He leaned back in his chair. "I know what it's like to be consumed with hatred. I do. Every now and then, I *still* feel some of that. But you know, it wasn't even worth it."

Sae was somewhat intrigued by this "friend" of Akihiko's, especially when she actually saw the change on his face, the smile disappearing and his eyes darkening and his tone dropping as he spoke in her silence.

"My mother was murdered by one of Akihiko's friends when I was very young. His best friend actually. Right in front of my face. I won't go into the specifics, but you bet your ass when I met up with him again, I wanted to kill him. I wanted to *hurt* him the same way he hurt me."

That caught her attention. If she could use Amada's story against Akihiko and his murderous friend, then she could find that leverage she had been missing. She let him keep talking while she listened for more information.

"Well, then he took a bullet for me and died."

Or not…

"For a week or two, I was confused and angry and upset. I wanted to be the one to kill him, but someone else took that right away from me. And then I started listening to the stories about him, how he treated everyone, how *devastated* they were because he was gone. And that was when it hit me."

His eyes lifted to meet hers and that damn smile was back on his face. “I learned that he didn’t really kill my mother. It was a terrible accident. He didn’t walk away from that horrific night and *move on* or continue on with his life. He hated himself almost as much as I did. He was going to die at a young age because of the medication he was taking to help him *cope* with what happened. He gave me a chance to come to terms with that night, with my hatred, and while it took me a while to fully accept it, I moved on. I wanted to live the life that my mother would have wanted me to have. And I wanted to live for the life he had been denied.”

Sae suddenly didn’t want to hear anymore. “Why are you telling me all of this? This has nothing to do with me or my job.”

He chuckled. “It has everything to do with you.”

“You want me to slap a murder charge on a man who is dead?”

“I want you to stop being so blind to your rage and *move on* .”

Her hands curled up again and her nails dug into her skin. “If you think you can come in here and be the mouth that Akihiko wants you to be, you’re-,”

“I’m not telling you to forgive him. I’m telling you to stop letting that anger get the better of you.”

She was pissed that one: he had interrupted her, and two: that he made it sound so *easy* . “Sure. Let me just pretend like that man didn’t rip my life out from under me and force me to deal with it on my own.” She slammed her fists on the desk. “This is his fault. I am this way because of him! And one day, he’s going to regret it!”

He placed his palms against the arms on the chair and pushed himself up. “And one day, *you’re* going to regret it.”

She watched him walk out of the office, her words caught in the back of her throat. Her nails cut into her palm. Her lungs burned with the breath she couldn’t release. She could have picked up the entire *room* and thrown it out the window.

But instead, she stormed down the hallway and literally banged on

the director’s door. The second she was allowed inside, she didn’t waste a *second* .

“I want Sanada arrested.”

Chapter 81

Chapter 81

“Your family is in real danger.”

And he could see it.

While Akihiko was thankful that the rest of his older friends had taken up the mantle to protect his family, anything could go wrong in the blink of an eye. Or behind closed doors. Which was why he panicked when his bosses made it *known* to him they were going to be having a “pleasant” chat with Sae. He trusted Aigis the most to keep out of sight while keeping Sae in her sights, but inside her office building, Aigis would attract attention.

Ken at least told him that everything was okay, but Sae did seem pretty riled up. He had yet to ask his bosses what the conversation was about.

He didn’t need to wait but another morning to find out what had happened.

“What the hell is this?”

It was like a wave of déjà vu, standing in his office, staring down the same group of people that had been in the room with him after the ordeal with Kamoshida. The politician, Ooe, was the first one to approach him.

“You’ve been caught, Sanada.”

He forced out a laugh. “And what have I been caught doing?”

Kishita lifted a piece of paper, a document, signed, into his face. “You’re under arrest.”

It became difficult to keep his cool, but he took a second to breathe. “Okay. For what?”

“Where to start.” He watched Sae push off his desk to come stand in front of him. “There’s the act of terrorism, several counts of assault, attempted murder, blackmail, must I keep going?”

His knuckles burned by his sides. “Attempted murder is a new one. Who did I try to kill if Kamoshida was an assault?”

“You’re lucky you’re not being charged with intent to harm for every injured train passenger from those accidents,” came the director’s interruption.

But Akihiko felt himself slipping. “What the hell is going on here?” He swept his eyes over those in the room. “Do you seriously think I’m a terrorist?”

“You’re working with them.” Now it was Akechi’s turn to approach and throw in his two cents. “I can’t keep denying the connection you have to the Phantom Thieves’ actions.”

He chuckled at the humor of the situation. Even though nothing was funny. “I mean, you could throw me in prison all you want, but I don’t have anything to do with them, or those accidents, so you’d be wasting your time.”

Both of his superiors cracked a grin. “Let’s find out.”

Before he could blink, Kishita grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and Masami, likely, kicked at the side of his right knee until he fell into the wall. His knee throbbed painfully, an ever reminder that he still wasn’t one hundred percent healthy, until they twisted his arms behind his back and cuffed his wrists.

He almost fought back, but not only would they use that against him, it would likely backfire in his face. “Let’s take you to a dark, cold room to chat.”

They would think him dumb if he truly believed they were going to “chat” with him, but again, he let them lead him out of the office with little resistance. There were multiple surprised gasps and complaints and a few threats thrown around the lobby of the station, but his mind was too rattled and his leg in too much pain to comprehend

much of what was happening.

“You can’t do this!”

“You’re not going to get away with this!”

“He’s done nothing wrong!”

“Get back to work or you’re all fired!”

“Then fire us!”

Akihiko managed to straighten himself out and pretend like he wasn’t hurting or extremely pissed off. “It’s alright. They just need to talk to me, and they might be scared I’ll lash out.”

While his comment got his workers and the others to relax to some extent, whoever was holding his arm beside him pulled on him forcefully enough that he almost hit the deck. He felt a hand around his neck again, yanking him up by his tie and forcing him to stare back into the furious eyes of his boss.

“Enough fucking around. Do that again and I’ll make this much harder for you.”

As much as he wanted to, he didn’t test the waters and allowed both of his superiors to lead him to an interrogation room. They threw him into the chair and did *not* uncuff him, snarled at him, then walked out of the room.

He knew the game they were going to play. The mind was a criminal’s best friend, but alone in the silence with *nothing* to do, it became the enemy. While Akihiko liked to remind himself that he was *not* a bad person, sitting on a stiff chair that wobbled unevenly was not doing himself any good.

Why the hell was he here? What the hell had he done *wrong* to piss off the wrong person? Who was the wrong person? Did they really think that trapping him in a room, knowing they were on the other side of the two-way glass, would *break* him into confessing about something he didn’t *know?*

Well, he *might* have known who was all in the Phantom Thieves, but he wasn't going to tell them. They weren't *bad kids.*

But the longer he sat in that room, the more his mind started to run away with him. Was Sae doing this on purpose just to rattle him? Was she doing this because she was *told* to? Was that why his bosses went to talk to her? Did they threaten her? Sae didn't seem all that upset when she listed off his supposed crimes, but once he had the handcuffs on him, he never saw her reaction. Not that she likely would have felt any different, but still…

It all came back to the fact it was *his* fault. He hadn't been there for her. He had kept her at a distance while still wanting to have that relationship with her. It was incredibly selfish of him to ask her to stay in his life. He deserved her anger. Her hatred. And if his arrest made her look like a hero, then so be it. He would do that for her.

He lost track of time. He'd been sitting for too long. His stomach growled, but he wasn't overly hungry. A few hours, maybe? How the hell did a criminal last *days* in a situation like this? If he rested his head against the table and tried to sleep it off (he was pretty tired, too) would they *finally* come talk to him?

A few minutes later, his wish came true and the door opened. As the table was the most uncomfortable object to try and sleep on, it took him a second to adjust to the headache from sitting up too fast. However, as soon as he realized Sae was the only one in the room with him, he wanted to go back to the silence and let it drive him crazy.

"Don't try and waste my time." She pulled out the chair, purposely let it scratch against the ground to aggravate him, then met his eyes with an intense glare. "Tell me what you know about the Phantom Thieves."

He took a slow inhale, which aggravated *her* , then shifted in his seat to get more comfortable. "Alright, fine. They wrote those calling cards to Kamoshida, Madarame, Kaneshiro, I didn't see one for Medjed, but I'm sure they did. Then, the criminals were thrown in jail and Medjed is no longer a thing, I guess."

Her hands slapped against the table. “Don’t think you’re being funny right now!”

“That’s honestly all I know, Sae.” God, he really wanted another chair. His back was killing him. “The calling cards were childish. The two that I saw were impressively made, but childish.”

“Who are they?!”

He shifted again. “I have no idea. I thought maybe they were some of Kamoshida’s victims, but then Madarame happened and that theory went out the window. So I don’t know.”

“You knew Kamoshida rather well.” Sae leaned back in her seat and crossed her arms with a huff. “And Kaneshiro. Two of the three targets. You see how well this looks for you.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “Right. Because beating the shit out of Kamoshida made him come to me and confess a few weeks later. That’s the strangest concussion if you ask me. Also, there have been four targets now, and I’m *not* a computer person at all. Two for four is pretty terrible odds, don’t you think?”

Sae pushed herself up with her hands on the table to snarl in his face. “I know you’re guilty. You’re the only person to have a personal connection to enough of these targets and a desire to get even with them.”

“Oh, sorry. Maybe next time I’ll be terrible at my job and let criminals go unpunished.”

She slapped him.

It echoed in the silence that fell over them.

He had to hand it to her, she was a lot stronger than he gave her credit for. His face *burned* .

Worst of all, she drew her hand into her chest like she *regretted* it. It was extremely painful to see the horrified look on her face. At the same time, he found solace in it. She was upset because she had snapped at him and struck him because of it. That had to mean she

still cared a little, right?

But he knew he couldn't reach out to her the way he wanted to, knowing the wrong people were listening to their conversation. "Look, Sae, I don't know who they are. I can tell you over and over again that I had nothing to do with all of this, because I didn't. I had no idea who Madarame was until *after* he turned himself in. I still have no idea what that issue was with Medjed. And I would like to think you don't peg me as a liar."

The second the word left his lips, he wanted to take it back. He might not be a *liar* , but he sure as hell wasn't *truthful.* Minako used to love to tell him that *hiding* wasn't telling the *truth* , which made him a *liar* . Being a terrible father and all but abandoning her was much worse. He'd rather her think of him as a liar…

Sae never got a chance to say anything in return as the door burst open again. Only this time, it wasn't an enemy. "This interrogation is over."

Mitsuru would never *not* be intimidating when she was angry, but she was even more so right now. She turned to Sae with a glare that could have murdered her and he was sure it worked on her. "I never thought you wouldn't stoop so low as to falsify charges to arrest a respectable individual."

A part of him wanted to tell Mitsuru it was okay. Sae was likely forced or forcibly persuaded into arresting him. They could all talk about it later, on their own terms, in their own company. However, he was relieved someone had come to defend him. He was in a lot more pain than he thought he was. His back, his knee, his face…his heart.

A uniformed policeman rushed into the room to uncuff him when Sae finally found the words to speak. "He's under arrest for crimes that we can *prove* he's done. You will not be taking my suspect out of my custody."

Mitsuru produced a document of her own, but the longer it remained in the air, the angrier Sae became. With his hands free again, Akihiko came to his feet in an effort to play the middle-man between

a life-long friend and his daughter.

“It’s alright, Mitsuru. They just wanted to talk.”

His friend turned her glare to him. “I wasn’t asking you.”

He was slightly intimidated by the bitterness in her tone, but Sae cut off his reply. “I don’t need you to stick up for me.”

“I’m not trying to stick up for you,” he added with his hands out in front of him. “I’m being honest.”

“Let’s go.”

While he wanted to walk out of the room, he also didn’t want the act to come back on Sae. Even if he was as honest as he *needed* to be, she was still his daughter. He wanted to help her, not give her more reasons to hate him.

Sae snatched the document out of Mitsuru’s hands and was out the door the next second. Akihiko almost called out to her, but Mitsuru put her hand against his chest and stopped him. “Enough.”

The coldness in her voice and her eyes started to grate on his nerves. “What else did you want me to do? Avoiding an arrest would have made me look *guilty* .”

“You could at least have called for an attorney.”

He laughed bitterly. “I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Let me tell you this,” she stated, folding her arms over her chest. “Sae wouldn’t need a reason to throw you in prison. She’s a force to be reckoned with on her own. You were going to jail, Akihiko, regardless of if you did anything wrong.”

“She had nothing on me but some circumstantial evidence.” His hands balled up into fists. “She wouldn’t have taken me to court because she would have lost.”

“Are you sure about that?” Her question caught him off guard, but then she sighed and rubbed the side of her head. “Let’s go.”

He wanted to ask her what the hell she was implying with her question, but thought it wise not to have it answered where people would use it against Sae and himself. That didn't mean the entire walk out of the building he wasn't preparing to fire off a remark once they were in the clear.

And once they were across the street, that's exactly what he did. "What the hell did you mean back there?"

She returned his scowl with something much more calming, but it did nothing to contain his anger. She didn't even shake off his hand around her forearm. "I'd prefer not to talk about this in the open."

"Then why the hell did you bring it up in the open?"

She sighed again and he released her. "I stopped you before *you* could lose your sense of mind and say something with the wrong people watching. Now." The glare returned to her eyes. "You're under my custody until they can build a stronger case against you. The Kirijo name still strikes a decent amount of fear in the higher-ranked policemen, so you should be fine for now."

She stopped, as if she wanted to say more, but didn't. "…But?"

"I have much I need to talk to you about."

It was a hell of a roller coaster of a day. Now, he was tired. He hadn't planned on starting his morning being thrown into a wall and promptly thrown into an interrogation room like he was a criminal. He didn't want to know about Mitsuru's implications about Sae. He didn't want to tell Mitsuru that she had been right about the Phantom Thieves (assuming she *didn't* know at this point) and that get Makoto in trouble.

"Let's talk about this over coffee."

Gods did he need it right now. Maybe the caffeine would help him come out of his mental haze and allow him to *think* . It would be a nice pick-me-up after the crazy twist of the day. And, if he was lucky, maybe he could get more information about this Isshiki from Sakura and…

Oh. He hadn't mentioned anything to Mitsuru yet. Nor was he positive she was going to head all the way out to Yongen-Jaya for coffee. Why was his list of things to investigate or figure out getting longer and longer and harder and harder…?

"Akihiko."

He snapped back to attention hearing Mitsuru's harsh voice. "What?"

She sighed again, then turned to head towards the train station. "We have much to discuss. Let's go."

He couldn't help himself. "Um. Where?"

"Someplace quiet."

He said nothing more as he followed behind her, but eventually, he led her exactly where he wanted to go. A part of him felt like a little child being taken to his favorite place in the whole world. They were greeted by a surprisingly energetic Sakura as they both took their seats at the bar.

Until he saw Amamiya at the opposite end, a young girl hiding behind him he had never seen before. She was clinging to him like she was terrified, and for a second, he saw one of the many young females he had been able to reach out to in his line of work. So while he had nothing against the young child, he had many things working *against* Amamiya.

Leading his daughter into Kabukicho?

Now, he had another girl on his arm?

The boy was smart to stay in his little corner. If he came any closer, Akihiko was sure he would have murdered him and given Sae a *real* reason to arrest him.

"Futaba, come over here and say hello."

The girl, presumably Futaba, shook her head and remained hidden behind Amamiya. The boy didn't move either. Sakura groaned

beneath his breath, then muttered an apology before he walked off to speak to the two of them.

Akihiko kept his eyes narrowed on Amamiya, but Mitsuru spoke quietly into his ear. “Futaba Sakura. That’s Isshiki’s daughter.”

He almost fell out of his chair, but was able to keep his voice quiet to keep from attracting attention. “What?”

“She’s the reason Sae keeps showing up here.” He suddenly didn’t need coffee. “She wants information on Isshiki’s lab and knew Sakura-san had adopted her.”

“H-How do you know all this?”

She chuckled like he had offended her. “If you ask the right people, they will provide you with answers.”

He was swimming again. What did any of this mean? Sae wanted information about the mental shutdowns, he thought anyway. What would Futaba know about them? Would Futaba have access to her mother’s data and *that* was why Sae was so forceful? And how would she know if it would prove anything, if Futaba even spoke to her at all?

“H-H-Here you g-go!”

Akihiko turned his attention to the coffee cup that was literally dropped onto the counter and watched a terrified Futaba scamper back to her spot behind Amamiya. It oddly reminded him of Sae when she was much younger, before she screamed at him, hiding behind him when a stranger approached and clinging to him for dear life.

“Futaba!”

Akihiko held up his hands with a smile. “It’s alright,” he said to the barista, who was groaning about the mess his daughter had made. As Sakura cleaned it up and apologized another time, he turned his eyes towards the two teens cowering away from him. “It’s nice to meet you.”

He was used to the fear, the shyness, and he wasn't intending on Futaba running up to him and answering all of his questions the next second. She did, however, tug on Amamiya's arm and whisper something into his ear when he leaned down far enough.

Mitsuru grabbed his attention before he could freak the poor girl out with his curious staring. "I feel something with her as well."

He narrowed his eyes in confusion. "What does that mean?"

"It means I believe we've found our hacker."

It was hard not to throw his head back and laugh. "That little girl is a hacker? How do you figure? Is *that* why you brought me out here?"

She was quiet while Futaba came around the corner, ushered by Sakura, and *carefully* lowered their new drinks to the counter. However, before she could run off again, Mitsuru reached out to her.

"I have a friend that I'm sure you would love to meet."

Had Sakura not been blocking Futaba's escape route, the poor kid would likely have taken off as far away as her body let her. Akihiko wanted to remind Mitsuru that a scared child needed *time* to warm up to them, if they chose to, but she kept on pushing.

"She keeps wondering when we will take a trip to Akihabara. She likes high-tech and computer things. Just like you do."

Akihiko was the one to cut the conversation off. "This coffee is really good. Thank you, Sakura-san. Both of you."

Futaba seemed interested in the two of them, but the second Sakura let her pass, she bolted. Then, he felt Mitsuru's eyes boring holes into his head. "What are you doing?"

"You're scaring her." He had known Mitsuru long enough to know she was about to accuse Futaba of whatever she was going to accuse her of. The poor girl didn't need that, especially since she was so young and scared enough already.

"Um." Akihiko was once again pulled away from his chat with

Mitsuru and face to face with a trembling Amamiya. Good. His eyes never met his. “Futaba might be interested in a trip to Akihabara.”

Mitsuru gave him a look to let him know she *did* know what she was doing, but Akihiko was having enough trouble on his own keeping himself from strangling the teen in front of him. Thankfully, Mitsuru didn’t let the silence hang in the air for long.

“Wonderful. I’ll set up a meeting then.”

In a flash, Futaba ran up to Amamiya, whispered something to him, then ran back around the corner and out of sight. It brought back a smile to his face. She sure had a lot of energy for someone so shy.

“She said I needed to be there.”

Just like that, the smile was gone. “Why do you need to be there?”

Amamiya turned away and placed his hands in his pockets, something Akihiko noted as a nervous tick. “She’s very shy.”

“Aren’t you a lady’s man…”

The teen stiffened slightly, then met his eyes for the first time since he walked through the door. “I’m not. I swear. I’m sorry for misplacing the trust you had in me, but it’s not what you think.”

At least Akihiko could tell he was being *honest* this time around. “So, are you dating Makoto?”

There was a light blush on Amamiya’s face that set off a protective instinct that almost made him reach over the bar and crush him. “Um. No. Well, not…not *yet* , maybe…later…?”

Mitsuru thought something was funny. It annoyed him. “Don’t mind him. He’s always been the jealous type.”

Thankfully, a few more customers came in and the attention was diverted off of him and the comeback that died in his throat. A minute later, Mitsuru’s phone rang, so she ended up excusing herself and headed outside to take the call. He thought it was odd that everything happened at once, but it was kind of nice being able

to breathe without wanting to smash his fist into Amamiya's face or snap at Mitsuru for whatever she was trying to do…

"Psst. Hey. You."

He heard someone trying to get his attention, or someone's attention, but it wasn't until he felt something tugging on his sleeve that he realized that *Futaba* had been trying to talk to him. He was genuinely surprised by her sudden desire to chat, let alone how she was trying to go about it. She didn't seem to be afraid of him, but she clearly didn't want anyone to hear what she was saying.

"You're trying to help Sojiro."

Akihiko didn't think he was *helping* Sakura by showing up every so often at his store. But, he did his best to give her a kind and playful smile. "He makes great coffee."

"He makes good curry, too!"

"Can't say I've had the curry." His eyes found the giant pot just around the corner to the kitchen. He couldn't tell her that he wasn't the biggest fan of curry, but… "I'll have to try it next time."

She nodded once. "Only if you keep your scary daughter away from Sojiro."

At that, Akihiko reeled back as if she had turned into a shadow and lashed out at him. "W-Wh…What?"

Did Sakura tell her about Sae being his daughter? Was this little girl going to run around town and tell everyone else? Or, if Mitsuru was right, would she secretly throw it up on the web and collect the money for any information about his family?

The next second, his blood started to boil.

Had *Amamiya* told her?

"Meh, I'm sorry. It was a secret." Futaba sounded so impassive that it made him more anxious than angry. But, she seemed like such an innocent child. Sakura was a good person. He could tell. So there

had to be a reason why Futaba was being so open with him.

“How did you find out?”

“I listened.”

She was being evasive, which was typical of a teenager that had something to hide. However, he wasn’t going to press her. Not yet. And also, she interrupted him.

“Sojiro says you’re nice. Mona says you’re nice. Ren says you’re nice. And Makoto is nice.” He was *very* confused as to what she was trying to say, but then she hopped in her place and stepped a little closer to him. “I’ll trust you.”

He found himself laughing because he was mentally stunned and didn’t know what else to do. “Well, thank you, I guess?”

“Will you be there with your friend?”

“Can’t say I’m a big techie guy,” he replied honestly, showing her the band on his wrist. “I don’t even know what this does and I’ve had it for weeks now.”

Futaba gave him a disapproving blank stare, but then her eyes widened and she rushed around the bar. Mitsuru came back to her seat, a small smile on her face. “It seems you’ve made a new friend.”

He turned his head slightly to find Futaba poking her head around the corner. He reached for his cup in front of him with a smile as well. “Maybe.”

And good friends usually shared valuable information.

But Futaba needed time.

Amamiya, however, he would speak to *now.*

Chapter 82

Chapter 82

Ren thought it best to walk Futaba home that evening after a somewhat successful day working at the café. She had been doing better about coming out of her shell, but he was thrown for the mother of all loops when she “bonded” immediately with Sanada when he had shown up. Ren was still scared to death that one false move would land him in the hospital, but Sanada was a completely different person with Futaba. At least, from what he could pick up and see while dealing with Sojiro and customers.

He was once again reminded that Sanada was a *good* person and a good father-figure. Any *good* father would be furious to find their kids roaming around a hot-spot for criminal activity.

Now, if only he could convince Makoto of that.

Once they were at the Sakura residence, Ren held open the gate for Futaba and allowed her to walk past him. “Are you excited for tomorrow?”

Futaba cringed, but she at least slowly nodded her head. “Um. I don’t know.”

“You’ll be fine,” he replied with a smile. “You’ve done very well this past week. I think you’re ready.” Futaba continued to play with her hands until he put a hand on her shoulder. “We will all be there, okay? No one will let anything happen to you.”

His calming voice seemed to work in his favor. She lowered her hands and gave another curt nod before she bolted into the house. He chuckled to himself as he shook his head, then turned to begin the short walk back home.

Was he excited? Oh hell yeah. He grew up close enough to the beach that it wasn’t anything special. What was going to *make* it special was his friends. Close friends. Comrades in battle. People

he could depend on to have his back, and vice versa.

And Makoto.

He would finally be able to see his crush in a bathing suit and it made him super giddy and dizzy in the head. He hoped it would be red, because he envisioned it bringing out her eyes. And it needed to be (would it be…?) a two-piece. He bet she had an amazing body with all the training she had done, all the fighting she did, how *strong* she could be. Her Phantom Thief outfit helped his mental image some, but not enough. She probably had a more toned body than he had, with a defined six-pack and shoulders and arms.

Maybe she would let him rub sunscreen on her? Would she want to do the same to him? He could already imagine her reaction, that perfect blush to accompany her wide eyes and parted lips, and he might kiss her. He should. And hold her against him and get that skin contact he had *dreamed* about for…

Ren was immediately pulled from his daydream when someone yanked him by the collar of his shirt and promptly threw him into a wall in between two buildings. His first thought was that someone was trying to mug him, but in the near pitch black cover of night, it was hard to tell.

His assailant held him by his shoulders and slammed him back into the wall again. “Explain to me how Futaba knows about my family!”

Sanada…?

He was pushed back into the wall again, his head smacking against it painfully. “ *Now!”*

“I-I-I don’t know!”

“Wrong answer!”

Ren had been terrified of Sanada a week ago when he caught him with Makoto in Kabukicho, but he never laid a finger on him then. What the hell had he thought happened to make him lash out like this?

“I-I honestly don’t know.”

If Sanada pressed any harder, Ren was sure he was going to break his collarbone. “Did you tell her?”

“W-What? N-No! I…I think she has some device in the café that lets her listen in on conversations.” He took a deep breath in order to calm himself down. Sanada would likely think he was *lying* if he didn’t sound confident enough. But damn, was this why Makoto was so afraid to tell him about her parents? He may never know why it had mattered, but to get this *angry* over it?

Whether or not he believed him, Sanada gave one last push before he released him. Ren stood, paralyzed in fear, waiting for him to pull a weapon or something or clock him so hard in the head that he died. He really wanted to know why he was so pissed off, but he also didn’t want that to be the last thing he ever said.

“Do you have any idea how hard it is to trust you when everything can be traced back to *you?* ”

Ren had the hardest time coming up with a reply. “Um…w-what do you mean?”

The defeated sigh he heard actually made him hurt. “Nothing. Just… go home.”

“W-Wait!” Ren didn’t have to fight too hard to keep Sanada’s attention, but instead of all that previous rage, he looked exhausted. It made him falter for a moment, but knew to make it quick in case he walked away. “I know it was stupid of me to take Makoto to Shinjuku, but she would have gone without me. I wanted to at least make sure she was going to be okay.”

Sanada ran his hands through his hair. “Fine. I get it. Don’t do it again.”

Was this about Minako maybe? Or another argument with Makoto? Or her sister? Or a combination of everything? “Is…Is something wrong?”

“And why the hell would I tell you?”

Ren jerked back at the sharpness in Sanada's tone, but he kept his eyes up. "I want to help. Your family has been wonderful to me, yourself included. Well," he added with a light laugh. "Until you rammed me into the wall."

It may have been too soon to joke around when Ren saw the glare return to his eyes. "Someone put a hit out on me, on my family, on my friends. And now, more and more people are aware of my children because someone can't keep their fucking mouth shut."

Ren thought he was going to throw up. "What?"

Sanada grabbed at his collar again and pulled him closer in a rage. "Someone wants my family *dead,* Amamiya. For five hundred million yen! Tell me what's so damn funny about that?"

His heart pounded painfully against his ribs and he could hear the echo pulsating in his ears. However, he didn't know what to say. He knew Sanada wasn't expecting an answer to his question, but Ren felt like he had to say something. He heard Morgana talk about Futaba and her spying on their conversations at Leblanc, so if Sanada had said anything about his kids to Sojiro, or another customer, Futaba would likely know. But, Ren thought Sanada got along well with Futaba, for the short period of time they spoke. Futaba wasn't about to go on live television and tell the world about Sanada and his family.

"I know you're angry," he started, speaking as calmly as he could to a man shaking in rage. "And I know I haven't been able to follow through on what you've asked of me, but please, *please* trust me now. Futaba would never say anything. I never said anything. And we never will. I promise you that. And I also promise that I'll keep Makoto safe when she's with us. I don't want anything to happen to her, or to you, or to anyone. I know this is a lot to ask, but you can trust me."

Ren held his breath for what felt like *hours* waiting for a response, verbal or non. While it looked like Sanada was much calmer than before, he was still worried any little thing could tip him back into a

fury. But when Sanada met his eyes, Ren swallowed hard.

“You’re pretty damn confident if you can say all of that to me.”

Was that good, or bad? “Oh. Well, I mean it.”

Sanada sighed heavily again. “I’ve never once doubted that you were a good kid, but a lot of these odd events have unanswered questions. But you’ve saved my life. You’re a terrible liar. Both Minako and Makoto seem to hold you in high regard. But I’ll tell you the same thing I told Makoto: stay out of trouble, or at least *say* something to me first.”

Hearing some level of praise made Ren feel proud for once in his life. He tried not to show it, just in case it was misinterpreted as cockiness. “Thank you, Sanada.”

“Alright, now get home. You shouldn’t be out this late anyways.”

Having the weight of anxiety lifted from his chest, Ren let out a light chuckle. “Right.”

If Sanada thought he was being cute or funny, he didn’t say anything before he walked off to the station. The minute he was back home, he dropped himself on the bed with a dramatic exhale that perked Morgana right up.

“You okay?”

Ren smiled into the hands he had covering his face. “I’m alive.”

Now he *really* didn’t want to go to the beach tomorrow. If Sanada’s little stunt wasn’t considered a rude awakening, Ren would have no idea what it would be.

However, bright and early in the morning, Morgana jumped onto his chest and woke him from the darkness of his dream. He choked out a cough as Morgana kept pawing at him.

“Wake up! I want to see Lady Ann in a bikini!”

Ren didn’t want to see *anyone* half naked today.

His phone buzzed against the windowsill and he reluctantly reached for it once he pushed Morgana off of him. Thankfully, it was a text from Ann, a simple reminder that today was the “big day” and she would meet him at Shibuya Station. He received some less mellow messages from Ryuji that he could practically *hear* . It was almost like Ryuji had never been to the beach, never seen a girl in a bikini or something other than a Shujin uniform.

Makoto was oddly quiet, but he was grateful. It was hard enough to keep his previous night’s mental images from reappearing on their own. Would she even go? Could she go? Was that why Sanada was desperate to strangle him, because he *knew* Ren was a teenage boy and Makoto was clearly someone he was attracted to…

If he thought Sanada was pissed yesterday over something that wasn’t true…

Ren had to play it cool. It would be hard. *Very* hard. But he had to. He didn’t want to die, but he also didn’t want to hurt Makoto’s feelings if she grew upset with him for being distant. He could meet in the middle, maybe ask Ann to find something to do to entertain Futaba and Makoto as “girls”, bond with the boys, sit as close to her as possible, but facing *away* from her…

“C’mon Ren! Don’t be so glum!”

And he was already failing if Morgana could pick up on his hesitation. “Sorry.”

As planned, he met Futaba in the shop once she actually showed up. She looked nervous, shifting her weight around on her feet, but Sojiro was able to bring out her excitement little by little.

“Don’t let any boys hit on her, ya got that?”

Perfect. He had a game plan. Protect Futaba from beach baddies. He could manage that easily enough. Unless, of course, Futaba randomly decided to come out of her shell completely and run off before he could find his voice and stop her.

“Let’s *go!”*

Ren couldn't tell if Futaba was anxious or thrilled; she reacted much the same, but there was an edge of eagerness to her tone. They both exchanged small talk on their way to the station, but she always hid behind him and stayed as close to him as possible when on the trains and around crowds of people. Once they were in Shibuya, Futaba ran off to talk to Ann and Makoto and Ren was forever thankful that Ryuji came to stand between him and the girls.

"Man, I'm so pumped! Beach babes, here we come!"

Morgana popped out of his bag while Ren chuckled nervously. "Shut up. No girl would ever fall for you on the beach."

"What's that?" Ryuji growled. "Ain't no one lovin' a cat, that's for sure."

Ren was already getting a headache and they hadn't even *left.* "Alright, stop. We have a long train ride, so let's get moving."

Soon, he was leading them all through the station and up to Shinjuku like he knew where he was going. He looked it up the night before to serve as a distraction, but he didn't think they would trust him enough to not get lost. Sure their picked location for their last big hurrah before school started again was relatively close to his hometown, but that didn't mean he *knew* how to get there.

And who else did he trust to know where they were all going? "You seem to be managing the stations quite well now."

Shit . Any other day, he would have beamed at Makoto's praise and returned it with something clever and charming, but today, he swallowed his reply. He couldn't let his mind wander to what she would look like again, because if he did, her dad would show up from the shadows and pulverize him into a pulp with his bare hands…

Thankfully, Makoto didn't take notice of his uncharacteristic silence and walked by his side without another word. Once they reached their transfer, she resumed her role of keeping everyone moving and together. Ryuji came back to his side after some quip to Ann about something and took a seat next to him on the train. He was

extremely grateful, yet extremely disappointed at the same time.

“Dude, I’m totally ready to find the love of my life at the beach!”

Ren tried not to roll his eyes. “The love of your life?”

Ryuji pushed against his arm in excitement. “Yeah man! I’ve even been working extra hard on that beach boy body the chicks will love!”

He didn’t think his friend would have to work *that* hard, given he was an athlete most of his life, but then Ren started to get self-conscious. Did he have a good body? He did work out, some, probably not enough, at least not on Ryuji’s level. Would there be other guys with toned bodies, ripped cores, whatever else girls were attracted to? Would Makoto give him a once over, then find someone with a better body than him? Was that something she looked for?

Nope. He wouldn’t worry about it. He *shouldn’t* worry about it.

“What’s your type of girl, man?”

He really, *really* didn’t want to talk to Ryuji about girls or his *type* or anything like it. Makoto was sitting across the goddamn aisle! What if she *heard* him? “Um, I don’t know.”

He hoped that was the end of it. “C’mon man. There’s gonna be all sorts of hot chicks out there!”

“Will you stop?”

“Lady Ann is all my heart ever wants!”

Ren was half-tempted to get up and walk to another cabin, but he remained in his seat to keep attention off of him. He simply chose to ignore Ryuji as best he could.

Finally, after two more transfers and almost a half an hour later, they all stepped off the train and into the station. It was nice to get some fresh air, to fill his lungs with something that wasn’t stale and polluted like the air in Tokyo. There was a hint of salt, cleanliness, *freedom* …

Kamakura was beautiful. The beaches were nice. The water was nice. The people were nice. The scenery was nice. He had visited once as a child, but he didn't want to think too much on how that trip had turned out in the end. He was here to make new memories with new friends…

And a lot, a *lot* of other people…

The beach was packed. So much so that poor Futaba tried to make a beeline back to the station, but was caught quickly by Ann and Makoto. Ryuji pumped his fist in the air, ready to tackle the challenge of finding a girl, and Yusuke just stared in wonder at the sight before him.

"Hoo yeah!" Ryuji threw his arm around Ren's shoulders with a smile so wide it looked horrifying. "The more people, the more chances I got, right?"

"We're here for a purpose, you dimwit!" Ann yanked on Ryuji by his ear and pulled him along with her as she scouted the beach for someplace to set up "camp". Yusuke was quick to follow after them, his head turning and soaking up as much of the culture as he could. Makoto continued to struggle with Futaba, so he decided that he should probably help her.

"It's alright, Futaba," he said, carefully reaching out to grab her free wrist. "There might be a lot of people here, but we're all here, too. You're going to be okay."

"No!"

Makoto sighed heavily. "We've been working on this for over a week. You can do this."

"Think of it like an unlockable achievement in your video games." He was mildly impressed that caught Futaba's attention. "Super rare. The ultimate! You have to endure one full afternoon here. With your friends. You will never get this chance again. So, do you want it, or not?"

From the corner of his eyes, he saw Makoto stare back at him like

he had lost his mind (it was still a cute look), but Futaba began to shake with anticipation until she hollered out and jumped in her place.

“I want that super rare achievement!” She then surprised Ren and Makoto both as she grabbed Makoto’s arm and took off towards the changing stalls. Ren watched them walk away in awe, a small smile on his face, and thought to himself that Makoto would make a wonderful mother.

Shit.

He did *not* just think that…

Ren forced himself to follow after the rest of his friends and explained to Ann that Futaba had run off with Makoto to change. She sighed heavily, then dropped a bag on one of the chairs they had managed to find vacant.

Ryuji leaned a little closer to her. “So. Uh. You gonna change here or what?”

Ann turned and poked him in the chest, but thankfully that was as violent as she got with him before she took off towards the other girls. Ren gave his friend a look, but Ryuji only shrugged his shoulders and threw himself down on the chair with Ann’s bag.

“Seriously, dude, Ann’s pretty good lookin’. Even if I can’t stand her most the time, you can’t *not* be excited to see what she looks like.”

Ren swallowed. Hard. As quietly as he could to keep Ryuji from noticing. “I’m sure.”

His friend didn’t care about his response and promptly grabbed at his own shirt and pulled it over his head. The blond was up on his feet the next second. “How do I look?” Ryuji struck a “muscle man” pose and Ren tried not to chuckle at how ridiculous he looked. “Do you think I’ll get a girl?”

“Why don’t you just ask Ann?”

Ryuji's jaw dropped rather comically. "W-What?! The hell, man?!"

Ren held up his hands in defense. "I mean, you just admitted that you thought she was good looking."

"And that I can't stand her most times!"

"Usually makes for a good couple."

"I don't see you askin' Makoto out or nothin'!"

And now he had his back against a wall. If he didn't say anything, Ryuji would hound him relentlessly about it. If he hesitated, Ryuji would likely put two and two together and he would rather him not. Especially today. Or, even worse, if he chose to tell him that he wasn't interested in Makoto like Ryuji had admitted about Ann, would Ryuji run and tell Makoto what he said?

"It's a pity there are so many people at a picturesque location for an art inspiring moment."

He almost hugged Yusuke for his odd interruption. It pulled Ryuji's attention away from his feelings on Makoto and onto whatever Yusuke was mumbling about. "Are you seriously going to wear that on a beach?"

Yusuke wiped a hand over his sweater. "I prefer to keep out of the sun."

"Should be in the sun more often." But then Ryuji turned his eyes back to Ren. "And you, man?"

Ren pleaded with whoever would listen that Ryuji wouldn't start pointing out flaws in his own body when he took his shirt off. Or tell him that he was in good shape and they should go fetch a girl together. So after another few jabs from his friend, Ren finally did what he was told and waited for the comment.

It didn't come. Ren heaved a sigh of relief.

That breath was sucked right back into his lungs as Ryuji's eyes grew wide, Yusuke lifted his trademark finger frame, and he heard

someone approaching.

He could try to deny it all he wanted, but truth be told, Ann was *very* good looking in a bikini. He didn't quite understand how she could eat as many crepes as she could and still be so thin in all the right places, but he wasn't about to ask her. His eyes lingered on her frame for far longer than he needed them to, but eventually, Ren was able to look away to where the other two came up behind her.

He tried not to act highly disappointed.

Futaba stood behind Makoto as if she was some sort of shield, a towel wrapped around her head like a mummy. However, Makoto hadn't changed at all. No deep red bikini. No swimsuit. Normal clothes. The same ones she had worn to the beach. Was she afraid to be seen in front of her friends? Did she make some sort of deal with Futaba or something?

Ren took a step closer to him to avoid the banter between Ann and Ryuji. "So. Where's Futaba?" *And why are you not dressed appropriately?!*

Makoto rotated her shoulder to push Futaba in front of her, then she carefully grabbed the edges of the wrapping around her face. "She's trying to find a loophole in your previous offer."

Futaba fought weakly for a few seconds, but Makoto was persistent and much stronger and managed to uncover the younger girl successfully. Futaba's eyes met Ren's, and he thought she seemed much more comfortable now that she could *see* he was there. She hovered next to Makoto for another second or two, then grumbled about being too hot and the beach too crowded and zipped off to sit in the shade.

As he followed after her with his eyes, Makoto stepped up next to him. "I hope everything goes well for her."

Now he had to find a way to bring up her choice of dress without sounding creepy or desperate… "I think she'll be fine." She nodded her head at him, then began to follow after Futaba. But, he reached out and stopped her. "It's kind of hot. You going to be okay?"

Makoto gave him a curious look. “Um, I think so?”

“You’re not going to change?”

Well, he didn’t really know how else to ask, so he just did. He at least tried to make it sound like he was concerned for her well-being rather than interested to see what she would look like. He could only hope she took it to mean as much, but when her face fell, he felt something squeeze around his heart.

“Oh. I-I…I’ll be fine.”

“I didn’t mean to sound weird or creepy or anything.” Yes, because that was sure to calm her down now. “Ah, sorry…”

At least Makoto shook her head. “No, I appreciate your concern. I just…um…”

When he took a step closer to her, she took an equal step back. “Are you sick?”

“N-No…”

He gave her another confused look, but chose to remain quiet and let her talk on her own terms. Strangely enough, he didn’t have to wait too long before she sighed and dropped her head again.

“I have a scar on my shoulder from my injury when we…went somewhere I shouldn’t have gone. I might be a little self-conscious about it.”

And he felt *incredibly* guilty and selfish. How could he have forgotten about that? That was the same day they went on their unofficial first date and he offered her a shirt to wear and he missed one of the balls at the batting cages and she asked him to help her grow as a person…

“I bet it wouldn’t make you look any less beautiful.”

Ren had to fight to keep his arm by his side rather than slapping a hand over his mouth. While he had meant it, he doubted it was anything Makoto was ready to hear yet. It was too forward, too

truthful, too much to throw out and expect her to not cut him down for it.

But he was so glad he kept his eyes up so he could watch that blush light up her face like she had been out in the sun too long. It almost made him laugh. “W-W…What?”

He didn’t think he had the capability to tell her again. “Don’t worry. Everyone has their scars, physical or mental, but those who care don’t matter and those that matter don’t care.”

She stared back at him blankly for a moment, the blush never fading, but then she blinked and a small smile formed on her face. “R-Right. T-Thank you.” He suddenly felt like he needed to jump into the water or he was going to burn alive and *not* because of the sun. “Maybe next time.”

Maybe next time.

Chapter 83

Chapter 83

One thing Minako seriously wanted to change about her daughter was her level of *confidence* .

“I don’t want to go to the beach.”

Makoto’s hands tugged at each other on her lap while Minako eyed her from across the living room. “Why not?” She then offered her daughter a sly grin, which was not caught since Makoto’s gaze was down to the floor. “Is Ren not going to be there?”

The blush on her face made Minako’s smile widen. “S-Stop that.”

“I think he’s probably nervous, too, honey,” she said sweetly, trying to ease Makoto’s tension. “After all, this is a big step in any relationship, but don’t worry. I’m sure Ren will take all the necessary first steps.”

Makoto huffed into her hands covering her reddening face. “You say all of this so casually.”

Minako leaned back into the couch. “And you need to be more confident in yourself.” She pushed herself forward and rested her elbows on her knees. “I can imagine you’re nervous, which I think is perfectly normal. But don’t let it ruin your day. Don’t worry about Ren so much as simply having fun.”

“B-But they’ll see my scar…”

And there it was. Makoto’s hand instinctively lifted to her shoulder as if it hurt. Minako’s smile turned into something more sad. “I thought you said Ren was well aware of your injury.”

She remembered that night well, for several different reasons. Akihiko had been furious, knuckles bruised and bloody from pounding away at a punching bag. Makoto came home wearing one

of Ren's shirts. She threatened to leave Akihiko *again* …

"W-Well," came Makoto's soft voice, to which Minako was grateful she had heard her. "I-I mean…it's still awful to look at."

Minako huffed out a laugh. "I think you're being a bit dramatic, honey. And besides, how do you know Ren wouldn't find it sexy or anything?"

"Mom!"

She laughed again at her daughter's darkening face. "Your dad has scars and I find him extremely sexy because of it."

Makoto threw herself to her feet in disgust. "Stop it, Mom." She then grabbed her bag by the couch while Minako continued to chuckle at her reaction. "I'm just not going to change. I don't want to explain to everyone else how I got hurt and I sure as hell don't want to hear your voice in my head all afternoon. And I also really don't want to hear how you think Dad is sexy, okay?"

Makoto didn't say much else to her for the rest of the day, just a scowl here and there whenever Minako gave her a look. Her daughter even ate dinner quickly so she didn't have to sit across the table with her staring at her. Once Makoto finished and made the announcement that she had some prep work for school to work on, she stormed off to her room, but not before Minako got one last jab in.

"I'm sure Ren is looking forward to seeing you!"

The door slamming shut served as Makoto's reply.

The apartment was only quiet for another minute or two before the front door opened and it slammed shut. Minako sighed, leaning back in her seat as Akihiko came into the room. She gave him a second to tell her what was wrong, but he instead chose to remain quiet as he threw himself down in the seat Makoto had left vacant moments before.

Akihiko released his breath quickly and nearly slammed his head on the table. "I didn't mean to startle you."

“Do I look startled?” she asked, her tone a mix of playful and aggravated.

He lifted his eyes for half a second before they fell back to the table. “No.”

She made herself more comfortable in her chair, trying to remind herself that everything was okay between the two of them now. He wasn’t leaving. She didn’t need to be worried. Right?

“So, what’s wrong?”

He threw his head back with a drop of his shoulders and Minako’s hands tightened over her arms. “I was arrested this morning.”

Not what she was expecting to hear, but after her initial relief that this wasn’t about *her* , she grew confused. “W-What? Why?”

“They think I’m one of them.” His head fell back into his hands, his fingers rubbing at his temples. “They think I’m one of those Phantom Thieves.”

The first thought that came to her mind was that he was home, so it must not have gone well for “them”. That or Sae did something *again* to keep him from spending the night in prison.

Until she realized that Sae was the one who *wanted* to arrest him for this exact reason. “D-Did…Did Sae okay this?”

His fingers dug into his hair. She knew his answer before he said it. “Not only did she sign the warrant, she was personally there. Then she tried to interrogate me before Mitsuru showed up and pulled me out of there.”

Minako’s heart fell in her chest. She thought Sae was just bluffing a few weeks ago when she said she would have Akihiko and Makoto arrested over the Phantom Thief craze. Sae didn’t show up when she said she would, so maybe it wasn’t truly *Sae* that called for the arrest. Maybe it was just her signature, her approval, but not her *heart* .

“Sae’s done this before. Arrested people with nothing against them.

Then took them to court and won."

Akihiko's words cut through the tension like a sword. "What are you saying?"

He held his head up with one hand while the other smacked against the table with great force. "She's abusing her power. She's not finding *justice* . She just wants the victory! All so she can shove this in my face!"

Her hands reached over the table and covered his fist. "Honey, Sae isn't like that. She's our daughter. She knows better."

The small laugh that came from his mouth was terrifying. "I saw the records Mitsuru showed me. It's getting worse as the years go by." He yanked his hand out from under hers. "If she wants to arrest me, that's fine. I wouldn't even fight back. But to arrest innocent people for the sake of a win?"

Minako's hands clasped together under the table and her eyes fell to the empty plate in front of her. She doubted Mitsuru would tell Akihiko all of this just to rile him up, but what had been the point? Would Akihiko have told Sae the truth, that Makoto was one of the people Sae was looking for, just so he could reconnect with her? Was that why Mitsuru freed him? Akihiko sure seemed willing to get locked up for something he wasn't *doing.*

"I'm sorry, Minako." The chair scraping against the floor brought her attention back to Akihiko. He wore a frown, but more importantly, he looked so *tired* . "I shouldn't have said anything."

She was able to come to her feet and stop him before he could reach the living room. She reached out for one of his hands and held it firmly between both of hers. "I know it's not easy for you to talk about Sae, more so like this, but I do appreciate you speaking to me." She took a step closer to him when she felt his free hand rest against her hip. It brought a warm smile to her face. "I'll try talking to her. I'm sure this is all work related stress and she needs someone to talk to."

His hand at her side moved to her back and pushed her into him.

His head rested against hers as she released his hand and wrapped her arms around him. She could tell how tired he was by how he leaned against her. “This is all my fault.”

But she would *not* let him fall again when she *finally* had him back. “Aki, I’ve told you before that we raised Sae just as we raised Makoto. You should know more than anyone how stressful that job can be. So please, stop blaming yourself and be the support Makoto needs you to be right now.”

Her comment pulled a weak laugh from him. “Makoto is strong enough to take care of herself.”

Minako leaned back in his arms with a grin. “So you’re ready to step down and let Ren be her support then?”

Her grin turned into a full-blown smile when he frowned and stepped out of her arms. “Over my dead body.”

Sleep wouldn’t come to her that night. She had long since turned her back to where she thought Akihiko was sleeping to stare at the opposite wall. All she kept replaying in her mind were Akihiko’s words from a few hours ago. Sae, arresting innocent people, just for the victory? One: how was that a victory? Two: why was the blame *only* on Sae and not on the system itself? Three: *her daughter* knew better…

Minako had accepted that Sae would likely remain furious with Akihiko for some time yet, but this was taking it a bit too far. She could understand Sae’s anger, even if it was a little ridiculous at this point, but she could understand. After all, Minako had just exploded in Akihiko’s face about his decision not that long ago.

But she would *never* scream and yell at her neighbor, or a random stranger while out shopping because of it. And that was *nothing* compared to taking their freedom away.

She wanted to believe that it was just stress, but even if that was the case, it was a pitiful excuse. She could overlook it had the person been someone who threatened Sae at one point or another, or her family, to where this was just her lashing out in retaliation. It was still

terrible, but it was better than *just because* .

Minako brought a hand to her eyes. There was no way Sae was a bad person. She was her *daughter* . It all had to be a mistake. A misunderstanding…

She almost fell off the bed when something landed on her shoulder, but the moment she realized it was just Akihiko's hand, she cursed under her breath.

He clearly wasn't asleep. When was he ever? "Are you okay?"

What Minako never gave Akihiko enough credit for was his ability to *know* her state of mind without her even *hinting* at it. Well, she probably didn't do nearly as good of a job as she thought making him think she was okay when she wasn't.

She didn't want to bring the topic back up, but perhaps it was the same reason he was awake as well. As hard as it was to tell herself to keep her mouth shut, she found herself rolling over on the bed to face him. Even in the darkness, she could tell he was exhausted. Her hand lifted to brush her fingers through his hair out of instinct. When she saw a small smile from him, she returned the gesture with one of her own.

"I remember the day Sae first started walking on her own."

Akihiko clearly hadn't been expecting her to say anything like that. "W-What?"

But she continued to run her fingers through his hair and remember the *better* times of her life. "She heard you come home from work so many times that she knew when to expect you. She would always stop playing with her toys and she would sit and crane her neck and wait for you to come around the corner." She laughed into the pillow. "Sometimes, she would tip over and she would be so sad because she missed you coming into the room."

Akihiko was tense for a few more seconds, then he sighed and rested his hand on top of the other she had on the pillow. "What's bringing all this on?"

She ignored him. “Then finally, she was able to push herself up and hobble her way to the entryway to greet you on her feet for the first time.”

He released a puff of laughter as his hand squeezed hers. “I remember I knocked her over.”

“And she was very upset by that,” she replied with a laugh. “Came crawling back to me with big, teary eyes because you kicked her.”

“I didn’t mean to.”

“I also remember how you overcooked her lunch and she knew it and shoved her plate off her chair.”

He groaned. She could have sworn he rolled his eyes. “How do you overcook mashed vegetables? She just didn’t want to eat it.”

“I remember coming home from the store one day and I was pissed at you because I was knocking at the door for a few minutes since my hands were full. You didn’t come to the door. And when I finally get everything inside, I find you and Sae curled up on the couch under a blanket and a book on your lap, fast asleep. I let it slide that day.”

His hand on hers lifted to grab a hold of her other wrist. “You don’t have to keep doing this.”

She wasn’t sure if he was referring to her reminiscing or brushing his hair. She assumed the latter. “She would always laugh when you played with her. She could have been in the worst mood when you were at work, but when you came home, she was the happiest little girl on the planet. She always listened to you. She followed you around wherever she could. You were always the one she wanted when it was bedtime…”

His grip on her wrist tightened as her throat constricted and her words couldn’t break the barrier. She tried to play it off and coughed into the pillow, but as soon as she turned to him again, she felt his hand rest on the side of her face. “Thank you.”

She was glad it was dark and he couldn’t see her tears, even if she

knew he *saw* them. “Why are you thanking me?” If anything, she thought he would be angry with her, bringing up the topic of their daughter when she knew damn well it was hard for him to talk about.

The small smile on his face brought a warmth to her heart. “Sometimes, I only see Sae as the girl who screamed at me and told me she hated me. But she wasn’t always like that. And it’s easy to forget that. So, thank you, for reminding me.”

She dropped her hand on top of his as his thumb brushed away a few tears. “She’s not a bad person…”

Akihiko pulled her into him as she quietly cried into his chest, but he didn’t say anything more to her. Sleep didn’t come any faster as her mind kept twisting the images of a smiling little toddler in her father’s arms into a hellish monster everyone was afraid of. She should have spent more time with Sae. She should have pushed harder when Sae denied an invitation to lunch or coffee. She should have stopped by her office, if she could, just to say hi.

Akihiko might have unwillingly set the tempest in motion, but Minako couldn’t say she did enough to stop it…

Eventually, after exhausting all her tears, Minako was able to get maybe three hours of sleep before she felt Akihiko stir beneath her. She shot up in a panic, upset with herself for falling asleep on him and possibly keeping *him* from getting sleep, but a soft hand on her back pushed her back down on top of him.

He said nothing to her, but he didn’t have to. Her eyes fell shut again as she focused on the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. “I didn’t mean to keep you up.”

She felt his hand run along her spine and he gave off a quiet laugh. “You didn’t keep me up.” He turned to kiss the crown of her head. “I actually just woke up. It’s the usual time anyway.”

A small smile came to her lips, but she chose to remain silent. It had been a long night, but if her presence and their conversation about their daughter had helped him sleep even the slightest bit, it would have been worth it. Sadly, she knew Akihiko had to work, but she

also didn't want to get up. She was comfortable. She was warm. She was happy. She sure as hell wasn't about to move or talk and break that bubble…

As soon as the thought crossed her mind, Akihiko shifted underneath her and she had no choice but to relinquish that moment. She sat up with him, watching him as he lifted his arms in the air and stretched out his back. He turned back to her and her heart skipped a beat. He looked so much younger now, less tired, less troubled. She almost melted into the bedsheets when he smiled at her.

"I should probably get ready for work." But he made no move to get up. He just kept looking at her like she was the most important thing in his life and she would disappear if he looked away…

"Yeah," she finally said with an exhale and a smile. "I'd hate for you to be late…" She almost added on, *since you're not in good graces with the right people anymore,* but didn't want to see a frown on his face. Not right now.

Akihiko was still for a few seconds, but then he nodded his head and pushed himself off the bed. Minako felt the air around her grow cold in his absence, even if he had a bright demeanor about him. Everything was calm when he was next to her, and although he wasn't *leaving* her, her thoughts couldn't find peace unless she was teasing him, or listening to his voice, or running her fingers through his hair…

He gave her a chaste kiss to the lips before he walked towards the door. She cursed herself inwardly for being too mentally distracted to catch him changing into his work clothes. "Don't worry about Sae, Minako." He kept his back to her and her heart smacked into her ribs when she noticed his shoulders tensing. "You were right. She's our daughter. Everything is going to be okay."

But he was out the door before she could get out of bed herself. Just like that, the bubble burst and she face planted into her pillow, all of those terrible images she conjured up the night before invading her mind again. Would Sae arrest him again? Would she successfully lock him away this time? Was Sae in trouble herself and too prideful

to admit it?

Regardless of the situation, she needed to talk to Sae. It could be simple and over coffee like the hundreds of other conversations had been years ago. It would be hard to keep her mouth shut and *not* mention Akihiko, but she would. Because it wasn't about *him* . It was work. It was stress. That's all.

Makoto offered a slight break from her mind when she came out of her room with a bag in her hands. Minako immediately jumped on it while her daughter stood in the hallway as if frozen to her spot. "I do hope you have a wonderful time. Take sunscreen. I'm sure Ren would appreciate it."

Makoto walked into the living room without a word, but her facial expression said everything for her. Minako continued to poke the fire. "I'm sure he's going to be sad that you're so self-conscious, but maybe he'll be excited for another chance."

Makoto's bag fell to the floor with a loud *thud* . "Will you stop that? He's my *friend* . You're not making this any easier for me."

She waved her hand in the air with a smile. "It could seal the deal, you know."

A groan escaped Makoto's lips. "Because I'm sure that's how it happened for you and Dad."

Despite herself, Minako laughed. "Actually, no. Your father was more concerned about training and didn't really…come prepared, is a good way to say that." She shook her head to clear the images before her laughter consumed her. "It may have set us back, now that I'm thinking about it."

Makoto huffed. "So stop pestering me about it, since it clearly didn't work for you."

She watched her daughter grab her bag off the floor. Minako wanted to toss out another joke to turn the tables back on her, but she stopped. It had been *years* since either her or Akihiko had been to the beach, since before either of their children were born. With all of

their friends seemingly in one spot now, they could all have that reunion she had thought of weeks ago when Ken first arrived in the city. Would Mitsuru allow that? Given the *reason* everyone was there, she could easily say no, but who was she to stop her?

Just a few days. Maybe even one full day. That was all she wanted. One day with Akihiko. Away from their troubles. Away from *people* , their children included. A chance to breathe. A chance to relax. A chance to see that look on Akihiko's face that he had worn earlier that morning. Even if all they did was sit on the beach, side by side, and did *nothing* …

"I'm leaving."

Minako snapped back to attention and caught Makoto right as she was walking out the door. "Don't be out too late. I'd hate to send your father to come get you!"

She could *feel* Makoto's eyes rolling and she was left alone a few seconds later. The minute the door clicked shut, Minako grabbed her phone and pulled up her contacts and found Yukari's number.

Let's go out for lunch.

Yukari had always been quick to respond back in their younger years, but Minako didn't get a response for another two hours. *Pretty sure Mitsuru wouldn't approve, but as long as you're paying.*

Minako's fingers danced quickly over the screen. *Then Mitsuru won't approve of the beach reunion I need your help planning.*

Yukari's reply was instant this time. *Then she's not invited :). Where am I meeting you?*

Chapter 84

Chapter 84

Akihiko gripped the hand ring tighter, cursing the silence that fell around him.

It was bad manners to have loud conversations on the train, but damn it, he needed *something* to distract him. As much as he tried to deny it and hide it from Minako that morning, the stories of a younger (and happier) Sae crushed him. It was nice to be reminded of a better time in life, but he bit his tongue several times while he listened to Minako reminisce.

Sae was only excited to see him because he rarely came home while she was awake.

Sae threw her plate on the floor as a baby because she didn't *like* what was on her plate, since he wouldn't know what she *would* like…

He fell asleep first, if he was remembering right, that day Minako mentioned him sleeping on the couch with Sae and a book. He was tired, but he wanted to spend his few free hours with a daughter he didn't see much of, and fell asleep within the hour.

All of that combined with the fact that it all brought Minako to tears made him feel sick to his stomach. He shouldn't have said anything to her about Sae, even if she would have forced the truth out of him eventually…

But he wasn't going to work. He couldn't waltz right into the department after his bosses had been physical in his arrest. He didn't doubt that they knew he was free, but showing up to work like nothing had happened would likely blow up in Sae's face. The smallest amount of relief he could bring her, he would do in a heartbeat.

Besides, he had *much* to discuss with Mitsuru, who met him at the

train station in Shibuya. It was becoming fairly common for the two of them to meet up and head out to Sakura's café for coffee. The revelation of the young Futaba being Isshiki's daughter still left him dazed, but Sakura also held valuable information. That and Akihiko felt it was becoming a safe haven where he could have serious "chats."

And he really, *really* liked the coffee.

"I don't care what you say, I think you two are married."

Akihiko bit back a retort when Mitsuru took her seat with a chuckle. "Think of us as 'divorced' then."

He was tempted to roll his eyes as he pulled out his chair and threw himself into it. "Thanks…"

Sojiro turned to the shelves of beans to prep their coffee, but there was an air of amusement in his posture. Akihiko didn't know what was so funny about something that was never *true* , but a shuffling beside him pulled at his attention.

Mitsuru handed a folder to him, keeping her voice low. "I think you'll enjoy this."

While the barista fixed up their drinks in silence, Akihiko flipped open the file Mitsuru had given him. It was thin, *not* about Isshiki or Shido or Sae or the strange happenings of the Phantom Thieves. Instead, a familiar face stared back at him.

Kaito Masami.

One of his bosses. The one he was pretty sure kicked at his knee during his arrest. "Why do you have his file?"

Mitsuru grinned, all-knowing, and it unnerved him. "Someone really doesn't like you."

"You don't need to hand me his file for me to know that," he replied, closing the folder and returning it to its owner. "Why bother showing it to me?"

The smile never left her face. “Fuuka would likely be able to explain it better, but for the basics, she was able to discover that *he* was the one who put up the request for your life and those in it.”

Akihiko almost fell out of his chair. “W-What?” He knew his bosses hated him, why he still couldn’t figure out, but he never thought they would go so far as to want him *dead* .

“Sadly, we think it’s all a front, but where there’s smoke, there’s fire.” She put the folder back in her bag as Sojiro dropped off their coffee. He either sensed the confusion in the air or knew their conversation was serious because he walked off to the other end of the bar to grab his paper.

Mitsuru continued on. “Fuuka could trace some of his activity and it even appeared in the Medjed ordeal.” She reached for her cup. “Whoever you have angered, you did so excellently.”

He suddenly didn’t need the caffeine. “Okay, so I might have pissed off someone once or twice in my life, but while my bosses hate me, to try and *kill* me are two different levels of hate.”

Next to him, Mitsuru replaced her drink on its plate. “Akihiko, I fear that you’ve done more than upset a handful of people. However, we believe Masami is on the lower end of the list. Which is why I asked to speak with you.”

He threw his face into his hands, his elbow almost knocking his coffee from its cup. “Damn it. That puts Sae and Makoto in greater danger if he’s only *the lower* end.”

“You needn’t worry,” she said softly. “Aigis, Ken, and Junpei are all monitoring your children. They know of the hit, but they are instructed to be wary of any individual that speaks to them alone.”

“That doesn’t make me feel better.”

Mitsuru chuckled again. “The quicker we gain information from Masami, the quicker we can figure out what is really going on.”

Akihiko groaned, reaching for his cup, but never lifting it to his lips. “And how the hell are you going to do that? I hate to tell you this, but

he's not one to just tell you his shady reasons because you ask him for them."

"We're going to set him up."

His hand shook as he went to take a drink and the coffee sloshed over the sides and burned the edges of his mouth. However, he was too intrigued by Mitsuru's words to notice the dull pain. "Set him up?"

She took the time to sip at her drink before answering him. "From your past experiences, he seems very eager to have you dead. But you would be too easy to go after directly. Which is why we've decided to pull his attention to your *wife."*

Akihiko dropped his cup on the counter and stood up in a rage. "The hell you are!"

Mitsuru put a hand on his arm to calm him down, but his mind was already running away with him. How the hell could Mitsuru *think* about using Minako in her plan, good or not? He wasn't about to allow it! If her plan *failed* , it would cost him too much…

Sojiro came up to them with a towel in his hand, but Mitsuru offered to clean *his* mess herself. Once he handed it over and walked back to his corner, she reached out to him with words. "We will not be using Minako." The admission pulled his breath out of his lungs and he dropped heavily into his seat. "I've asked Yukari to play the role. Given no one has seen the two of you together, chances are that they won't blink twice."

She chuckled at his reaction and it made it hard to find his voice. "W-Wait… *Yukari* is going to be…"

"Yes, Akihiko. I would like to think you would have been furious had I pressed you to make Minako a part of this, given the circumstances." She took another sip of her drink. "You and I will hide out in a remote location to await him. Junpei will be the one to bring him to us after he passes along the detail of having captured your wife for the money. We can go over more specifics when the day comes."

He sighed heavily. “That’s the most insane thing you’ve ever come up with. Whatever Fuuka has on him should be enough to draft up an arrest warrant and then we can-,”

“He’s a small fish, Akihiko,” she said with a scowl. “Their plan is much more elaborate than tossing out a hit on you. What Fuuka didn’t tell you is that your name has come up before on the dark web. This goes beyond one human. In order to secure your safety and the safety of your family, we need leads on the others he is working with.”

He ran his hands through his hair in frustration. “What if this doesn’t work? Me, interrogating a man who’s been against me since day one, in a remote location, wouldn’t make me look any less guilty to Sae or her team.”

“Then you can arrest him and interrogate him at the station once he takes the bait. Surely there are *many* crimes he’s going to be committing for you to have reasonable cause to arrest him.” Mitsuru leaned back in her seat and crossed her arms. “This is the first promising lead we’ve been able to find. Please, if you have something better, I would love to hear it.”

“And what’s going to happen if he figures it out, or doesn’t take the bait?”

Mitsuru flicked some of her hair over her shoulder. “Who do you take me for?”

“It’s…It’s not that,” he sighed with a groan. “If this was just about me, then fine. But it’s not. They’ll go after my kids. They’ll figure out who Minako is and go after her. And what about all of you? *You’re* in danger, too, you know.”

A solemn look came to her face and she was quiet for a few seconds. Then, “I know you’re concerned. However, I need you to trust me. I promise you that nothing will happen to your children, to Minako, to any one of us. I know what I’m doing. Alright?”

It was hard to contest her when she spoke so confidently, so he didn’t. He nodded his head, feeling the weight of his exhaustion as

he dropped his head into his hand leaning against the counter. Sojiro took that as a sign to approach them and Akihiko was *not* about to turn down an offer for more coffee.

“May I ask you a question?”

Akihiko knew Mitsuru wasn’t speaking to him so formally, but he didn’t know who else she would be speaking to. He turned his head enough to glance at her, but sure enough, once Sojiro put a new cup of coffee in front of him, the man folded his arms and frowned.

“Depends.”

As if trying to lighten the mood, Mitsuru lifted her cup from its plate. “I do not mean to pry into your personal life, but would you mind telling me how you know Wakaba Isshiki?”

Akihiko almost dropped his *second* cup of coffee. “W-What are you doing?”

He grimaced when he heard Sojiro grumble beneath his breath. “And why are you asking?”

“Business, of course.” He wanted to stop Mitsuru so they could discuss this in private *first* , but there was something in her posture, her eyes, that told him to keep quiet. “I should properly introduce myself. My name is Mitsuru Kirijo.”

Sojiro’s eyes went wide, but he didn’t know *why.* Granted Mitsuru often introduced herself by first name only, why would Sojiro know about her? Because Isshiki knew about her? Was this a good start?

The barista sighed while he removed his cigarettes from his pocket. “I knew there was something different about the two of you.”

Mitsuru placed her cup back on the counter. “I apologize for not being truthful on our previous meetings, but I have a tendency to try and remain in the shadows as I can. Now,” she added, leaning up into her hands. “I will start. My family has been investigating odd occurrences and the supernatural since before I was born. However, I’m afraid I didn’t personally ask Isshiki-san about her work before her passing. I’ve come to learn that her research is missing or has

been erased, but from the few other people I've been able to track down and speak to, they all say she was very close to you."

Sojiro lit his cigarette and took a long drag before waving his hand in the air. "Fine, yeah, I was close to her. But I know nothing about what she was doing. But I will tell you this." His eyes, cold and angry, landed on Akihiko. He straightened his back as a result. "She didn't kill herself. Someone killed her."

While Akihiko had some slight suspicion over the validity of Isshiki's death, to hear it voiced from someone else, someone who was *close* to her, solidified that feeling. "Who would want to harm her then?"

Again, Sojiro took a deep inhale of his cigarette. "I have no idea. Someone who wanted her research, or to know more about it, and she wouldn't let them."

"This was about her work, yes?"

"I don't mean to bring up a horrible memory, but, would you tell me about *how* she died?" He grew extremely uncomfortable, not only for speaking over Mitsuru, but the sad look that came to Sojiro's expression. "It can be later. I'm sorry. I just want to help."

The silence that followed was stiff and heavy. Akihiko almost told Sojiro to forget it, that he could look into it on his own, because he of all people would know how hard it was to talk about the dead…

"To be honest, I don't know much. But it was only Futaba and her, then the car that killed her. I think she was killed before the car hit her, but I don't know how."

Akihiko's first thought was that the only other person there, Futaba, would have had to push her. His second thought was that she simply tripped and fell into the road…

His stomach twisted painfully. Although there were some differences, it sounded a lot like how his partner had died years ago. A healthy man had a heart-attack and stumbled into the road and got hit by a car? A young mother tried to kill herself by lunging in front of a car while her daughter watched?

Something was out of place, and *terribly* wrong…

Mitsuru's voice pulled him out of his thoughts. "You were familiar with my name."

Sojiro discarded his dying cigarette into a nearby ashtray. "I've heard of you. She actually thought about reaching out to you for help, but…she never did."

Akihiko could tell it struck a nerve in Mitsuru when she frowned and looked away. But it wasn't her fault. Mitsuru couldn't know *everything* about *everyone* . Besides, what was done was done, unfortunately, but they could work together to bring those who were involved to justice.

The question now, was *who?*

"If you're looking to investigate someone, I would start with Shido. Nothing seemed right with him, and he made unofficial visits to her lab a little too often."

As if the conversation couldn't get any *more* chaotic. *Masayoshi Shido…*

In his stunned silence, Mitsuru asked, "May I ask why you have named him?"

Sojiro popped open his carton and pulled out another cigarette. "You ever get that feeling in your stomach that someone is vile and corrupt?"

"A gut feeling is never enough I'm afraid."

"No." Akihiko pushed his chair back and held himself up against the counter. "We have to look more into him. This isn't the first time his name has come up in stories that don't make sense." He gave Mitsuru a hard stare. "If you don't want to do it, I will. Because to me, a gut feeling is more than enough to warrant an investigation."

"Do you know what you're saying?" She twisted in her seat to face him with a look mimicking his own. "Do you *know* who he is? Why do you think I wanted you to stay away from him?"

His fist came down on the countertop. “I don’t care who he is,” he replied, keeping his voice low, since he had attracted attention from a few of the other customers. “I won’t let him get away with this.”

He dropped some yen bills on the counter and he was out the door before Mitsuru, or Sojiro, could tell him to stop.

It was too early in the day to make a trip to the bar in Shinjuku in hopes of running into Ohya, but he figured he could do some mid-morning/afternoon research on his target so he could know what questions to ask that night. He had to get to the bottom of this. Either Shido was in some way involved, or it was all a coincidence, and he did *not* believe in coincidences. Not on this level, at least.

Akihiko was extremely relieved when he stepped into the apartment and Minako wasn’t around. He had forgotten that she would think he was at work, so he didn’t want to have to explain to her where he was and what he had been doing or *talking about* . He loved her, he really did, but sometimes that wasn’t a *good* thing. She would distract him when he needed to *focus* , whether it was her intention or not, whether she was in the *room* or not…

However, with the looming threat over his head, and *her* head, he frantically grabbed his phone and called her. She was quick to pick up, likely confused as to why he would be calling, or thinking he had called about Sae or Makoto or…

“Um…where are you?”

He knew better than to try and lie to her, but if she didn’t ask where *he* was or why he needed to *know* , then he could play it off. “Oh.” She sounded surprised at least. “I’m out with Yukari. Lunch date!”

He released his breath and fell back onto the couch. “Oh. I, uh, just wanted to check-in with you.”

There was slight laughter over the line, but to his complete surprise, Minako didn’t question his pitiful excuse. “Okay, sure, have a good day. I love you!”

Her words came fast and the click of her ending the call even faster.

He wanted to sigh in relief, but he couldn't now with his brain trying to figure out what Minako was doing…

Well, she sounded cheery enough. He could ask her later on that night. After his trip to Shinjuku. He had a mission to do.

Sadly for him, he didn't know where to start. He had tried looking into Shido from home months ago and came up empty. Fuuka had tried to help him, but she provided nothing that he could have used, minus the tidbit about Isshiki and Mitsuru. What he *really* needed to know was something concrete, something that could put the loose ends of this mess together.

Loathe as he was to admit it, Mitsuru was right. A "gut feeling" was really not enough to bring someone in for questioning, even if it was a great start. With someone of Shido's caliber, his attempts would be shut down before he got them off the ground. But he had to try.

He started like he usually did and gathered his thoughts on paper. Shido was a politician. Shido knew Sojiro, or at least Sojiro knew him from their affiliated jobs. Shido's name came up first with Ohya and her friend. Why would a politician care about "interesting" lab research? Was it the research, or the *person?* Had Shido tried to make an advance and Isshiki shut him down and he had her killed over it?

If that was the case, he picked a fine way to murder her, in front of her daughter, hit by a car afterwards…

All those other people that had been "silenced", had they died the same way, and someone just listed the cause of death as a heart-attack?

…Did his partner know Shido?

If any of this was connected, it went *far* beyond one person.

And what did *he* have to do with any of it? Did he? Or was he just being targeted because he was a cop who didn't cave at the politics of police work? He thought the threats would all be put to rest with Kaneshiro behind bars, but if anything, it got *worse* . After all, the

guy with the black mask tried to kill him *after* Kaneshiro's arrest. The hit was taken out on him after Kaneshiro's arrest…

The guy with the black mask. He was the key. All of the mental shutdowns had to be happening because of *him* . The guy went into places, such as his subconscious and the Metaverse, he thought, and caused something to happen. The cat, Amamiya's cat, had told him as much when he was about to suffer one of his own. Would he have died because of a "heart-attack" like everyone else? Was the guy with the black mask seriously responsible for so much *death?*

His voice sounded so *familiar…*

Did he work for Shido? Did Shido know how this maniac was *murdering* people? He had to. No decent person would okay the fact someone murdered a mother in front of her child.

The Phantom Thieves.

Was someone possibly trying to frame them? Akechi seemed to believe that the Phantom Thieves and the mental shutdowns were one in the same, but Akihiko *knew* Ryuji. Makoto was his daughter. And as much as he hated to think it, Amamiya wasn't a *bad kid.* No matter how much he tried to dig into Amamiya, to intimidate him, he never *once* struck Akihiko as bad. And he had years of experience deciding who was bad and who was not.

He needed more information from Ohya. She would know (or should know) some of the shady secrets Fuuka might not be able to find online. He needed to speak to Futaba one on one. Perhaps hearing her side of the story, despite the horrible memory he would force her to recount, could help him understand how Isshiki died. He also wondered if Futaba had known the nature of her mother's research. Mitsuru's interest, Sojiro knowing her name, all led him to believe that Isshiki had some knowledge of the supernatural. But, he wouldn't know if that was the Metaverse or not until he asked.

If Futaba *did* say that Isshiki suffered a mental shutdown similar to how his partner did years ago, and that she was killed over her research on the Metaverse, he wouldn't know what to do. Or if the opposite happened and she denied any of his assumptions with

truthfulness, everything would have been for nothing.

Gods so help him either way…

Chapter 85

Chapter 85

Makoto never thought she would be so sad to start school again. Summer had been kind to her, for once, and it was a weird change of pace for her having to spend the first day back *focusing* on schoolwork and student council business. A fellow classmate had even asked her if she was feeling well that's how amiss she had been. It was embarrassing.

She felt even more embarrassed when she saw Ren, leaning back against the wall by the stairwell, conversing with Ryuji. He caught her eyes and his mouth curled into that familiar grin that left her burning on the inside.

She hadn't forgotten how he looked at the beach, nor how he had sat and talked with her for most of the day with a light sparkle in his eyes…

Flustered, Makoto broke eye contact and headed down the hall to take the *long* way up to the student council room so she didn't have to pass him. She could still feel his eyes on her as she walked on, but she made it a point not to stop and give him the benefit of her *knowing* . Because whenever she saw Ren's face and eyes (and now *body)* , she heard her mother laughing at her and poking at her and she'd rather not have that…

To her surprise, her mom had not pressured her for details about the trip. Makoto had thought about asking her about her lack of interest, but chose not to since she *really* didn't want to roast alive. That and her mom didn't seem like she was listening, if she was being honest…

Her dad had been quiet altogether. *That* concerned her more than anything. When she had asked him if he was okay (he looked like he had a bad headache or something), he told her he was fine, but reminded her to stay out of trouble and walked back to his room.

He probably didn't know she had spent the day at the beach with her friends, Ren included. If he had, he would have been much, *much* more vocal about it.

However, now that it was a few days later, Makoto worried that something was bothering her dad again. When she saw him, he was always tired, giving her concerned looks, telling her over and over to stay out of trouble. Truth be told, her mom didn't seem like anything was wrong and that worried her, too. She clearly had to see how miserable her dad was, right? So did she just not care, or did she know the cause and it wasn't that big of a deal?

"Niijima-san. I need to speak to you."

It was hard to contain her surprise, but it was harder to contain her confusion when she realized that Kawakami-sensei was the one who needed to speak to her. "Oh. Um s-sure."

The young teacher eyed her curiously for a second, but then she sighed heavily and waved her hand. She was looking very tired all the sudden. Maybe adults were *always* tired and that was why her mom didn't care that her dad looked much the same way all the time…

Kawakami led her to a nearby corner and Makoto felt her shoulders tense. What in the world could this possibly be about? "I hate to ask this of you so suddenly, but your name came up as a possible chaperone for the second years' class trip next week."

Makoto was thankful she was already close enough to the wall or she would have fallen against it. Why did she need to go? Why weren't the teachers going? Were they? Did she need an answer right away? Makoto obviously couldn't tell her that she had to consult with her *parents* first, but her dad had a hard enough time letting her out of the house sometimes. Hadn't she heard the second year students were going to *Hawaii?*

"O-Oh…" was all that came from her mouth as she brought a hand to her chin to help her think. There was no way her dad would let her go. Maybe her mom. But she didn't want to worry her dad if she went behind his back to ask permission to go. "Um, may I ask why

you're asking me to go? I thought there were teachers going?"

Kawakami sighed like she usually did. "Yeah, that was the plan anyway." Another sigh. "Makes more work for me."

Makoto gave her another second or two to elaborate, then asked again. "Is something keeping the teachers from leaving?"

"The police, I guess."

Makoto almost jumped back and bumped her head into the wall. "The police?"

The teacher nodded once. "I guess they are trying to figure out details about Kamoshida and the Phantom Thieves." Her hand went to cover her eyes like she had a headache. "It's a mess."

Maybe that was why her dad was so tired and frustrated. *Now* people were starting to look into Kamoshida *months later* because of the Phantom Thieves. It sparked anger in her heart, because her dad cared then, but no one else did. If they would have listened to him *then* perhaps the Phantom Thieves wouldn't even be needed!

She inhaled deeply, then bowed to Kawakami. "I will see if I can arrange my schedule to allow me to go. I should have an answer for you by tomorrow or the following day."

Kawakami sighed (again) and rubbed at the sides of her head. "Thanks. I appreciate it."

Makoto didn't know if she was being sarcastic or if she was just irritated, but she bowed to her again and walked off to the student council room. Once she was inside and knew no one else was around, she heaved a sigh of relief and dropped into the closest chair she could find.

Why did she have to be so dependable sometimes? Why couldn't they ask someone else? Had they asked someone else? How many other third years were going to go? Just her, or a handful of people? And if so, *why ask her?*

She would have to broach the topic at dinner, assuming she got

home and there were no more surprises. She figured she could prepare her argument, should she need it, but truthfully, she didn't want to go. Someone needed to stay behind with Futaba, and probably Morgana, since he wouldn't be easy to hide on a plane. Her dad would throw a fit, she was sure, so she didn't want that to anger him any more than he already was. Plus, she hadn't figured out who the student was who might be trapped in a scheme in Shinjuku...

Most of all, she really, *really* didn't want to see Ren on the beach again. Not now. She still needed more time to calm down from the *last* trip. Gods if her parents somehow managed to let her go, she wouldn't be able to return home that same day to catch her breath. She would see him the next day, and the next, on the beach, smiling and having fun…

What was *wrong* with her?

The only reason she felt she should go was because she felt *obligated* to go. Kawakami had personally approached her to ask. She didn't really have a good reason to say *no* , even though she wanted to, and her parents wouldn't let her anyway.

But, she was a senior, and student council president, so it was kind of her responsibility to keep the younger students in line to some degree. She had also never been out of the country before, so maybe it would be a nice breath of fresh air. She was going to chaperone, not to take a vacation, so she could probably avoid Ren more often than not…

The light tapping on her door startled her, but she pressed her hands against her skirt and straightened her back before allowing the person to come in. Once the door shut and she saw *who* it was, Makoto cursed under her breath.

"Working hard, I see."

Makoto averted Ren's sparkling eyes and charming smile as best she could as he came to sit down beside her. It was way too hot in the room now. "Um, can I help you?"

“Actually, I have something for you.”

Oh god, what in the world could he *possibly* have for her? He didn’t know her *super* well, but she would be a fool if she didn’t catch the way he always looked at her and what it all meant and if he got her anything she was going to lose her mind more than she already was…

He held out a piece of paper with a smug grin, almost like he had read her mind. “I had to get this signed by Sojiro before I was allowed to go on the trip. I figured you would know what to do with it.”

Try as she might, Makoto came very close to hitting her head on the table when she exhaled deeply. When she lifted her hand to take the slip from his hand, he pulled the paper back. “W-What?”

That look on his face would never fail to make her *burn* . “I heard Kawakami-sensei asked if you would go.”

Well, at least she didn’t have to *lie* to Ren about her reasoning. “I doubt I will go.” She didn’t miss how his face fell. She also didn’t miss how it made her feel. “It’s hard enough for my dad to let me wander around Tokyo, but to allow me to go to a different *country?”*

Ren smiled at her regardless. “I think it would be nice to have you come along.”

“And what about Futaba?”

He chuckled. “She barely managed the beach the other day. Taking her to Hawaii might be a stretch for her right now.”

“No,” Makoto shook her head, trying to keep herself from being swayed by Ren’s words and his smile and… “I-I meant, she’s going to be alone.”

“Morgana will keep her company.”

He had an answer for everything, didn’t he? “Well, aside from my parents likely keeping me from going, the student council work needs to be taken care of as well. Who would do that in my

absence?"

"We're going to be gone for a few days, Makoto," he said with a laugh. "I'm sure it will be waiting for you when you come back."

She opened her mouth to contest him, but she couldn't think of something intelligent to say. "You are really pushing this, aren't you?"

Another smile. Another skipped beat of her heart. "I just think it would be nice to get out for a while as a team, you know? I mean, yeah the beach was fun and all, but we didn't really leave much behind for long. I don't want to think about the Phantom Thieves or school or anything on this trip. And I think you'd enjoy it as well."

Right. As a team. Because they were all *friends* and a *team* . "I would only be going to chaperone. I wouldn't have time to enjoy the trip."

"Oh, I'll get you out of that, don't worry."

Now Makoto was getting annoyed. "Listen, Ren, I appreciate it, but assuming I was even allowed to go, I would go because someone expected me to do a good job watching over the students and keep everyone under control and-,"

"Don't you ever just want to…escape?"

His hushed tone kept her retort lodged in the back of her throat. Did she want to escape? Of course. But that wasn't *reality* . People expected things from her and she wasn't going to disappoint them. The teachers did, her parents did, her *friends* …

Her thoughts stopped when she heard the chair scrape along the flooring. "I know you would be wonderful at keeping the peace if you went, but I think you would have a lot of fun, too." He offered another warm smile, even if his eyes were more sad this time around. "I'd have more fun if you went."

Great. So now Ren was sad, and Ren was never sad, all because she didn't want to go? How she managed to find her voice before he walked out of the room, she would never know. "I…I will speak to my

parents. However, if I cannot make it, I still want you to enjoy your trip."

The smile reached his eyes this time as he nodded his head. "I'd come steal you from your home if you wanted me to."

She sighed in frustration. He laughed in merriment. He was out the door before she could reply to his comment.

The rest of her time was spent trying to figure out who the student was in Shinjuku, filing more permission slips and financial reports, then finished up some homework before she called it a day. She wasn't getting much done thanks to her conversation with Ren, but she also didn't want to head home and have a talk with her mom about the trip in case she was okay with her leaving.

For once, she actually wanted her dad to say no, to keep her from going anywhere.

Not to her surprise, when Makoto finally got home, her mom was setting up dinner on the table and her dad was on the couch in the living room. Her mom was the first one to notice her return, but she only locked eyes with her for a second before going back into the kitchen.

Makoto chose to place herself on the couch across from her dad while her mom finished up dinner. "How was school?"

It was usually her mom that asked, but her dad didn't look up at her and kept his eyes on his phone. He looked to be angry again, so she spoke with a timid voice. "Um, good, I guess."

Should she bring it up now, or wait until he felt better? Would he feel better? Her voice must have annoyed him, since he stopped fiddling with his phone and looked up at her. "You guess?"

She wiped her hands on her skirt and decided it was now or never. "I…I was actually asked if I would, um, be willing to chaperone the second years on their class trip coming up."

He lowered his phone and sat up straight. "What happened to the teachers?"

Makoto was surprised he *didn't* know. "Well, a lot of them I guess have to stay and talk to the police about…Kamoshida." Something flashed in his eyes. Maybe he didn't know. "So they asked me to go in their place."

Suddenly, her mom was in the room with them with a huge smile on her face. "Going back to Kyoto for a class trip, huh?" She rubbed her dad's head with a laugh. "Doesn't all of this sound familiar?"

Her dad swatted her hand away before Makoto looked down at her lap. "They're going to Hawaii."

And then, there was silence.

No jokes from her mom.

No angry comments from her dad.

Nothing .

Eventually, she had to look back up at them. She met her dad's eyes first, but he was more confused than angry. "Hawaii?"

"Oh, um, I guess the principal is hoping this will motivate students to come to Shujin in the future."

Her mother said nothing as she walked back into the kitchen. Makoto expected her to pounce on her for the "quality time" she would (not) have with Ren, but she didn't. It was a little intimidating.

Her dad broke the silence again. "And you *want* to go?"

Makoto lowered her eyes again. "W-Well, I don't know. I feel I should go, so I'm living up to the expectations of the teachers. It's just all so sudden and-,"

"You're not going."

She expected her dad to say it, but it was clearly her mother's voice. "W-What?"

"You're not going."

She looked to her dad, but he soon dropped his head into his hands and rubbed at his eyes. He was tired. She should probably not annoy him by asking her mom why *she* was the one who didn't want her to go. But, as soon as she was sitting down at the table, she couldn't stop herself.

"Why don't you want me to go?"

Her heart grew heavy when her mother sighed. "I'm fine with a day trip somewhere, Makoto, but a foreign country is a little different."

Well, Makoto could see that. She had never been that far from home before…

"I think you should go."

Hearing her *father* tell her that almost made her fall out of her chair. "W-What?"

He picked up his chopsticks like he never said anything out of character. "I think it would be good for you to get out of the city for a few days. And if you want a chance to prove that I can trust you, this is your chance."

Makoto failed to have words to say before her mom placed her chopsticks back down on the table. "What the hell is wrong with you? You want to send our daughter halfway across the world to *babysit?* You of all people should know what happens on these kinds of trips where there's a severe lack of adult supervision!"

"I thought you trusted Amamiya?"

There was a thickness in the air that would have suffocated Makoto had her mother not taken that chance to push her chair back and walk out of the room. While she was beyond impressed that her dad had stuck up for Ren, she was terrified that this argument would spin out of control and they would fight again…

"I'll talk to her, Makoto." Her dad pushed his chair back, too. Makoto almost told him not to leave her alone at the table, but she didn't want to sound pathetic. "You should eat your dinner."

She tried, but she ended up putting everyone's almost untouched meals away in the fridge.

Makoto considered it a blessing in disguise that she hadn't heard her parents yelling at each other. They were usually good about keeping their voices down if they were upset, until recently. So, she considered it a good thing that she couldn't hear their argument. However, she still didn't know herself if she wanted to go. Now that her *mother* was the one telling her no, she was far more worried about going because *Ren* was going to be there…

But her dad was right. It would probably be nice to get out for a while. To stop thinking about school, about the Phantom Thieves, about her sister going crazy. Her dad likely thought it best to send her out so he could work on tackling the person who had the hit put out on him. She was probably safer overseas than she was in her room at the moment. Still, she was happy to know her dad had regained some faith in Ren, enough to have her go on a long distance trip with him…

Hadn't Ren also told her it would be a good idea to *escape?*

…Did Ren speak to her dad?

There was a light tapping on her door the next second. Makoto quickly pushed herself off the bed to open it, surprised when she saw her mom on the other side.

"Can we talk?"

Her first instinct was to ask, "Is everything okay?" But, her heart calmed slightly when her mom gave her a kind smile and stepped into the room. When she dropped onto her bed, however, Makoto swallowed hard.

"I know I joke around with you a lot about Ren and boys, but…" Her mother paused and Makoto simply stood in the middle of her room, frozen, worried about what she was going to say next. Did she not approve of Ren as a person? Did something happen recently to make her change her mind about him?

“And I don’t want you to think I don’t trust you, or him, but young teenagers like yourselves tend to do a lot of stupid things when you don’t think you will.”

She was *very* confused. “Um, what are you trying to say?”

Her mom sighed deeply. “I shouldn’t keep thinking that you’re living out *our* lives, but that doesn’t make me any less worried that you’re going to follow in our footsteps.”

“Mom.”

Her dad had a tendency to be too direct sometimes. Her mom, not so much. When she sighed again, Makoto sat herself on the bed beside her and braced herself for what she was going to say.

“We went on a school trip all those years ago. Mitsuru was really the only person there doing her job. There were a few teachers, but not enough to accommodate all the students. Needless to say, there was a lot of drama, a lot of misbehavior, and three boys that found out the hard way that Mitsuru took her role as executioner *very* seriously.”

Makoto chuckled at that. She could only imagine her mom was referring to her dad, and a few other friends, and she could just see Mitsuru in a rage, ready to murder them for…whatever they had done.

“And I know you don’t like it when I talk like this about your dad, but, he was a little… *slow* to understand his feelings for me. So after Mitsuru put him on the brink of death, I went to try and talk to him, since he was so upset about what had happened.”

A pause. A deep breath. Makoto held hers.

“And I slept with him that night. Despite always keeping a head on my shoulders and telling myself to take it slow, in that split second, my reasoning just shut off. We weren’t even officially dating at the time. All because I tried to tell him it was okay and I was alone in a room with him…”

When it *clicked* what her mother was saying, her face flushed. “W-

What?!”

Her mom put her hands behind her and leaned back. “I regretted it. It was an impulse reaction and all the right conditions were met. But my point is, I know that you like Ren. And I’d like to think he likes you. You two might be the smartest people in the world, but *one* moment is all it takes. I don’t want it to happen to you.”

Makoto had no idea how she was able to find her voice when her entire body was on *fire* . “D-Do you think Ren would…um…”

She felt a weight on her forearm. “Boys will be boys, Makoto. If a half-naked girl can grab your father’s attention, it will happen to them all.”

Now she felt like she was going to be sick. “Stop it…”

“Makoto, I just want you to be safe. I don’t want you to find yourself in that kind of position and not know what the right thing to do is.” Her mom’s hand tightened on her arm. “If the two of you talk about it, then…fine, but I also don’t want you to be afraid to tell me. Okay?”

Her head was spinning. “B-But…everything worked out for you and dad, right?”

A more somber look crossed her mom’s face. “We managed. I had to pull teeth to get him to talk to me, but you’re my daughter, Makoto. And I don’t mean to scare you, or disgust you, but it can happen. And I don’t ever want you to feel the way I did.”

She had so much more she wanted to say, to get off her chest now that her mom had revealed some dark secret, but her mother stood from the bed, cutting off anything she would have said.

“Your father thinks you would be happy taking a small vacation. So, we will allow you to go, if you want to. And only if you promise that you will be *safe* .”

Makoto clamped her mouth shut, unable to put her feelings into words, and nodded her head. “I-I promise.”

If she *did* decide to go, she sure as hell would be as far away from

Ren as she could be.

Chapter 86

Chapter 86

Minako had lived her life making hard decisions.

Okaying Makoto's oversea trip had been one of the hardest ones to make. Not only because her *daughter* would be thousands of kilometers away for *days* , but also because Akihiko wasn't *thinking* like she was.

To be honest, Makoto would likely be safer in Hawaii than in Japan. Mitsuru and Fuuka had been working on finding out who had thrown up that hit, but so far, there was nothing. That, and if Makoto was in Hawaii, she would be under certain obligations to *stay out of trouble* that she wouldn't follow had Minako asked her to on her own.

"You do know Makoto is a *girl* and Ren is a *boy* , right? You of all people should know what happens in those kinds of situations, thousands of kilometers from home."

She saw it in his eyes then. That disgusted *terror* . For a second, Minako worried for Ren's life, but then Akihiko blinked, took a deep breath, and shook his head.

"Makoto is student council president. If anything, she would be the one to go around executing people for even *looking* at someone the wrong way."

She tried not to, but she chuckled. "You did more than just *look* , Aki."

But, he changed his tactic. "I know you trust him, and I need to be able to trust Makoto. This is a good time for her to prove herself to me. And I honestly think it will be okay. Besides," he said quietly, casting his gaze to the floor. It wasn't bright in the room, but Minako could still see the dusting on his cheeks. "It would be nice, just the two of us."

And *that* was the deal breaker. He told her they could travel around Tokyo. They could take a day trip somewhere. They could get a nice taste for what life would be like when it was finally just the two of them.

She kissed him before she smiled and walked off to speak to Makoto.

When she returned several minutes later, there was a frown on her face that she knew made him nervous. “What happened?”

Minako shook her head, her frown turning into a pitiful half-smile. “I always argue with you when you want to keep Makoto from growing up and experiencing life, but here I am, holding her back.”

She came to sit on the edge of the bed and Akihiko was quick to come to her side. “Did she say something to you?”

“No, she didn’t,” she responded quietly. Quietly enough that he had to lean into her to hear the rest of her statement. “While I would never want her life to follow after ours, if she finds her own happiness, that’s all that matters to me.”

She fell into him a moment later and he moved his shoulder and wrapped his arms around her. “Trust me. Amamiya knows not to mess around with Makoto. She’ll be fine.”

She laughed into his chest. “I say I regret that night with you, but I don’t. It may not have been the smartest thing for me to do, but it led us to where we are now.”

He stiffened against her, his fingers digging into her arm slightly. “Maybe I’ll have a nice, long chat with him before he leaves.”

“Stop it,” she said with another laugh. “I highly doubt anything will happen. Because you were right. I do trust Ren. And I need to trust Makoto, too. I just feel like I shouldn’t have said anything to her. Now I think I’ve scared her.”

“Good.”

Minako pulled back in his arms to look up at him. “I don’t want her to

be afraid of him. And I sure as hell don't want *you* to terrorize Ren and have that keep him away from her."

She didn't give him a chance to reply and she pushed him back on the bed. "Now, I wonder how I would spend all that time with you without any kids in the house?"

She didn't need a verbal answer to *know* what he was thinking, but she spared him his embarrassment and rolled off of him to rest against his side. She chuckled into him when he released his breath, but then he got more comfortable on the bed, wrapping an arm under her to pull her into him. He kissed the edge of her hair as she placed one of her hands on his chest.

"I love you, Aki."

He kissed her again and she could feel the smile on his lips. "I love you, too, Minako."

To her surprise, Minako slept very peacefully that night. There was one time she woke up, terrified that she had been dreaming for *years* and Akihiko was never a part of her life. She never had children. She had no one. It was bizarre, but the feeling left her cold and scared. It wasn't until she realized she was *warm* , that Akihiko was actually sleeping next to her, that she was able to put the dread out of her mind and out of her heart.

For now, he was with her. Makoto had to take this time to grow on her own. She would be a horrible mother if she didn't prepare her daughter for the real world and kept her home at the mere *thought* of questionable circumstances. This trip would be good for her, assuming nothing *bad* happened, nothing more than a cute walk on the beach as the sun set. Minako could accept that.

But then her thoughts turned to Sae. While Sae had done quite well on her own, she was *forced* to grow up so she could leave the house and her father. Minako didn't want to admit that she had grown tired of Sae's incessant screaming that she turned her back on her to take care of Makoto, but…maybe that was what she had done. Maybe that was why Sae was still so *angry* . Maybe Sae wasn't trying to hurt Akihiko as much as she was trying to hurt *her.*

She only managed to fall back asleep counting Akihiko's breaths and taking comfort in the fact that he really was *sleeping* .

Morning came much too quickly for her. The bed was cold. She was alone in the apartment. Makoto at least had made a plate for her for breakfast and left it in the fridge with a note. It was simple, a shy *thank you* for her chat the previous night, but Minako's heart clenched painfully in her chest.

Would Sae ever do something like this? Say *thank you* after a serious heart to heart with her? Sae wasn't ungrateful; she had told Minako a few times in the past few years that she was thankful for her time and her company over coffee. It had been months since she had even seen Sae. Did she still like coffee? Did she still like black coffee, or had she developed a sweet tooth recently? Why would she *not know* these things about her own *child?*

Akihiko would have been upset with her by forgoing breakfast, but she did anyway. Her stomach was twisted into one giant knot and she wouldn't be able to keep anything down anyway. She should have spoken to Sae weeks ago, but life kept happening and her heart really didn't want to make the stand it needed to and have that backfire in her face.

However, she had to do something. Sae shouldn't have had Akihiko arrested the other day. Sae knew better than to arrest *innocent* people. The longer she kept waiting to have the talk with her daughter, the more her mind would run away with her. She needed answers. And she needed them *now.*

Minako's first attempt was to text Sae to see if she wanted to meet for coffee if she had a break. In the past, if Sae couldn't make it, she would respond back and tell her she was busy. She always replied, whether it was a yes or a no.

Three hours later, Minako decided she needed to take the conversation to Sae. She stopped by the coffee shop they both had frequented, picked up their usual order, and carried two coffee cups and a bag of sweet bread to the courthouse. She had been inside once, back when she wanted to give Sae a desk present for her new job. However, she had no idea where to go or who to talk to so she

could keep unwanted eyes off of her.

After clearing security, Minako walked to a board that had a list of names and locations. She didn't find Sae's name, but found the floor for the prosecution, and as she waited for the elevator, she came up with a story in case she needed one.

A loved one had survived a "mental shutdown" and she had heard that was Sae's case to work on. It was true enough that Minako didn't feel like she was *lying* , and it was good enough (hopefully) to get her to where she needed to be without drawing attention. Maybe Sae would even take an interest in hearing about what had happened to Akihiko weeks ago…

"Are you looking for someone?"

Minako gripped the coffee cups in her hand as she turned to the very young man who had approached her. He looked familiar, especially when he flashed a smile, but she could *not* pinpoint where she had seen him.

"Are you here about a case?"

Would he know where Sae was? It was going to drive her nuts that she couldn't think of this guy's name, but talking to Sae was what brought her here. The coffee would be cold before too long. "Oh. I'm actually looking for a…Niijima-san? I heard I could give my information to her."

The more she looked at the young man in front of her, the more she started to wonder how *young* he really was. He sure as hell didn't look old enough to be working in the courthouse, let alone on the prosecution floor. Was he a part-time secretary, perhaps? Where had she *seen* him before?

She caught the subtle way he looked down to the *two* coffee cups in her hand and Minako held her breath. Was it obvious to this guy that she was there for a different matter because she had brought along a *gift?*

"Um, I'd like to make this quick. My husband has been a little bit

under the weather and I was going to surprise him with *hot* coffee." She laughed at herself. "I guess it was kind of silly of me to pick it up before I came here instead of after, but I needed a pick me up, too."

Whether or not her stupid story worked, the young man lifted his eyes and smiled again. "Oh, my apologies. I'm simply trying to figure out how I know you. You seem so familiar."

Maybe they had both met months ago or something? But, hadn't Ren asked her the same thing and neither one of them had met before? She didn't have the painful headache she had with Ren when meeting this man, so she doubted it was persona related.

"You look familiar as well," she finally said, hoping hearing his name would spark something in her mind.

The young man chuckled into his gloved hand. "I'm not aware of too many people who do not watch the news these days. It seems I'm mistaken."

Minako tried to rack her brain for news stories that she had heard from Akihiko or Makoto, but nothing to help her came to mind. A second later, he bowed to her, then extended his right hand.

"I'm Goro Akechi. Most people refer to me as the teenage detective. I work with Sae-san."

Minako really didn't watch the news, but she had watched a few segments in the past and she knew that was where she had seen him. On TV. A flashy celebrity. One who probably annoyed Sae, if he really did work with her.

"But I'm afraid Sae-san has stepped out of her office for a moment." Minako also didn't like the fact a teenager was comfortable enough to address her daughter in a casual manner. "If you'd like, I can pass on your information when she returns."

Well, she would have, had that been her reason for trying to talk to Sae in the first place. She wanted to tell him she wouldn't mind waiting for her to come back, but that could be hours, and she had coffee she was supposed to give to her *husband* in her hand.

Minako mentally cursed her luck, but Sae wasn't one to leave her office for long. If she could stall, have a second conversation with Akechi, maybe Sae would show up. Her coffee would be cold, but she would *not* walk away when she had worked up the courage to talk to her…

"W-Well, it's kind of…strange, the information…" If she spoke slowly and nervously, not only would she be more believable, but she could waste time. "D-Do you mind if I sit?"

Akechi appeared to be very understanding and helped her to sit on a nearby chair. He took a seat beside her, then he pulled out a notepad and pen to jot down her statement. She found it funny that he not only wore gloves, but was left handed, too. Akihiko was a cop and he wore gloves and he was left handed…

"Please, there is no need to hold back." Akechi's brown eyes met hers. "We take all cases very seriously."

His declaration was a good thing, she thought. So long as she could keep her story straight and not get her words twisted around enough that she choked on them. "Okay…well…" She paused to take a breath and look down the halls, trying to act paranoid when she was really looking for Sae. The less she said, the better off she would be.

"You're safe here, Miss."

Shit . Minako simply told him the basics. "S-Sorry. It's still so confusing, but…I heard from a friend that Niijima-san was investigating something about a "mental shutdown." I didn't even know what that was, but they informed me that…perhaps my," she added in a sniff for good measure. "My husband suffered one, too."

She caught the way Akechi stilled in his writing, but it was only for a split second. "Your husband had one?"

"I'm not sure, but it was very strange and I thought maybe Niijima-san would be the one to confirm it or not."

Next to her, Akechi sat back in his chair. "Do you mind if I ask you your husband's name?"

Minako immediately shook her head. “I’m sorry. He doesn’t know I’m doing this. I don’t want it to be nothing and it gets back to him.” She breathed out a laugh to deflect his question. “He’s kind of secretive and gets angry a lot.”

“Ah.” He placed the pad on his leg again and lowered the pen to the paper. “Do you mind explaining the situation?”

Where are you, Sae? It hadn’t been long since she had walked through the courthouse doors, but she was starting to feel like something was *wrong* . Not with Sae, but with the conversation she was having with Akechi. She couldn’t put a finger on the feeling, but she regretted ever saying anything at all. She was aware that there were a few cops that Akihiko worked with that did *not* like him. His bosses tried to hurt Makoto. Granted this kid didn’t work with Akihiko, but he did say he was a *detective* . Was he one of the good ones?

She was getting ahead of herself. Never once did she mention Akihiko by name. How would this guy know she even *knew* him?

She figured there was no harm in explaining the situation. Especially since Sae was still gone. “He’s usually very active, so when he was sick in bed for the day, I thought something was wrong. But he kept talking to me about someone trying to kill him and he was…I don’t know, fighting? I think? I thought he was having a terrible nightmare, but he had never been so tired before.”

Akechi stopped writing again, but this time, she could see his eyes narrowing in confusion. It was a crazy story, but if he worked with Sae, and Sae was in charge of the case, then why wouldn’t he believe her? Didn’t all mental shutdowns happen this way? Didn’t that one conductor fall asleep while operating the train?

Minako suddenly felt small. She had no idea what she was talking about. And now, she had just opened up about it to some kid who probably thought she was the most insane human to ever walk through the doors.

“Did your husband describe who he was fighting?”

Minako turned to look at him. “Y-You don’t think this is all too abstract, do you? It’s true. And I’m scared it’s going to happen again.”

There was a glint in Akechi’s eyes that caught her off guard, but he waved a hand in the air to dismiss it. “I know I’m not supposed to divulge information, but your case is quite common. Those who suffer these “shutdowns” always see this individual. If you know, and it is the same character, we can hopefully use your information to find the responsible party.”

Oh. Was this more serious than she thought? How many other people was this black mask guy going after? Would he go after Akihiko again? What had Makoto and Ren done to stop it from happening the next day, or days after it? Had they prevented it from happening ever again, or was it only a matter of time?

Did *they* know who that masked guy was?

…Was Akechi a Phantom Thief like Makoto? He was the same age, if he was in high school. Akechi had spoken to Makoto before. He worked closely enough with Sae that if he *was* bad news, either Akihiko or Sae would have told her, right? He seemed nice enough…

“I-It was some guy…person I guess…wearing a black mask?”

Some sense of realization came to Akechi’s face. Minako took that to mean that Sae’s criminal was the same criminal that targeted Akihiko. The same criminal that Makoto and Ren knew about. She felt bad, piecing all of this together in the courtroom rather than days ago when she could have brought a name to Akechi. Assuming, of course, Makoto knew the name of the bad guy. She sure seemed to know something to lead to his identity.

“I now know why you look so familiar.”

Akechi spoke under his breath and Minako was far too wrapped up in her thoughts to hear anything more than a mumble. “Is this going to help you?”

Akechi offered her another kind smile. “More than you think.” The teen pushed himself up to his feet. “I will leave Sae-san with a message. You’ve put us one more step closer to justice.” He then held out his hand to help her up. “Thank you.”

She never thought she would drop by the courthouse and *help* , but it felt kind of nice. Once Makoto came back from her trip, she could ask if she knew a name or something about the black mask person so she could give it to Sae. Maybe then Sae would stop hounding Akihiko about crimes that she knew he didn’t commit.

“I-I hope I was of some use, at least.” She cleared her throat and lightly bowed her head. “Um, thank you, Akechi-kun, for listening to my story.”

“What’s going on here?”

Minako turned to find Sae rushing up to the two of them with impressive speed. Minako swore there was a cold breeze that followed after her. Akechi, however, thought little of it and chuckled into his hand.

“She’s come to us with information about the mental shutdown cases.”

Sae didn’t even blink and pushed herself between the two of them. Her eyes narrowed and Minako suddenly regretted coming to the courthouse. “I’m sure you wouldn’t mind retelling your case *to me* , would you?”

Sae grabbed her arm in a way that was forceful, but not painful, but not in a way she should have grabbed a person there to speak with her. Either Akechi was used to the behavior (that thought made her cringe) or he didn’t notice because he sure as hell didn’t say anything.

Minako only realized she was in Sae’s office when the door clicked shut behind her and Sae was once again glaring at her. “What the hell are you doing here?”

She threw on a weak smile and lifted the now cold coffee. “I-I

wanted to talk to you."

"So you *lie* to Akechi?"

"N-No." Why the hell was she so nervous with her *daughter?* Was this why Akihiko always hesitated to talk to her? "I mean, I told him a true story, but I really came here to talk to you."

Sae's eyes lost the glare and she became more confused. "How would you know about the mental shutdown cases?" A second later, her eyes flared to life again. "Did Akihiko tell you this? Did he tell you to come talk to me?"

Minako placed the two coffee cups on a nearby surface so she wouldn't drop them and have *that* anger Sae even more. "No. I actually saw it happen. I didn't know what was happening until… your sister told me."

She worried that bringing up Makoto would send Sae into another fit of rage, but it oddly did the opposite. "Did something happen to you? Or Makoto?"

The softness in her voice caught Minako off guard. "W-What?"

"Is that what you told Akechi?"

Sae was scared. She was worried. She was still that little girl Minako thought she was. Sae might harbor unnecessary hatred towards Akihiko, but it didn't extend to her or Makoto. That alone spoke volumes to her.

It was hard to keep the smile off her face, but she settled for a small one. "I really miss our coffee dates."

She watched as Sae exhaled deeply, then dropped her bag on her desk and leaned back against it. "I haven't had the time."

Minako could feel tears welling up in her eyes. "You do know that any time you want to talk, you can ask me. I know this job is stressful, so if I can help you, I will."

Sae crossed her arms with a huff. "You can start by telling me what

you told Akechi."

She didn't want to repeat the story, since Akechi said he would inform her himself, and mentioning Akihiko would likely piss Sae off again. "He said he would tell you."

"And I'm asking *you* to tell me."

The only reason Minako took a seat was so she didn't lose that connection she was building with a daughter she hadn't seen in months. "Okay. I told him that something happened to someone I know and they were very abnormal and tired and they were saying things to me that didn't make sense."

"Who?"

Did Sae *need* to know, or was she thinking she had lost her mind and a *name* would validate her story? But if she said this all happened to Akihiko, Sae wouldn't believe anything and kick her out. "Why does it matter?"

Sae's response was sharp. "Because you're withholding details in this person's defense and I need *details* to accept the truth."

Minako prayed that this all ended well. "This happened to your father, Sae." She figured while Sae was silent, she should get everything else out into the open before she lost her chance. "He's had nightmares for years, some that I can't get him to come down from, but he's always able to go into work the next day. This was different. It wasn't a nightmare. It was *real* . I mean…as real as fighting someone in his head, anyway. He said someone was trying to kill him. A guy in a black mask. He fought this person for a full night and a full day. I've never seen him that tired before, but I swear to you, he was on the brink of *death* ."

She chanced a look to Sae, just so she could think about something *other* than that terrible night. Sae was confused, she knew that, but Minako also caught the concern in her eyes. Sae always tried to deny it, but every time something happened to Akihiko, it hit a soft spot in her. With how angry she had been lately, arresting him and threatening him, Minako assumed that soft spot was gone.

But it wasn't.

It was still there.

Sae was just getting better at hiding it.

It brought back the smile and the tears to her eyes. "He's okay, Sae. It was a long few days, but he's recovered."

There was a slight change on her face; from someone who was worried to someone who was thinking. "You said Makoto told you it was a mental shutdown?"

Technically, no. Minako knew from various chats with Akihiko that Sae was in charge of the mental shutdown cases. And how was what happened to Akihiko *not* a mental shutdown case? Hell, she hadn't even *known* it was a mental shutdown case until she had told Akechi and he seemed to know exactly what she was talking about. Makoto had only told her about the guy with the black mask and her and Ren had taken care of the problem. Hopefully.

She wasn't about to tell Sae that, simply because Sae wanted *details* and that was where she couldn't provide them. "She said she had heard about the black mask guy, so I figured they were one in the same?"

Sae exhaled loudly. "And you spoke to Akechi about this pitiful comparison hoping for…what, exactly?"

"I wanted to talk to *you* ." Minako stood from her seat and took a step closer to Sae. "That was just my fall back in case you weren't around and I had to state some kind of reason I was here at all."

There was a flash of anger across Sae's face. "And I'm to assume you didn't use Akihiko's name, correct?"

Minako nodded once. "I know better."

The anger was gone, but Minako caught the weariness in her posture. Sae lifted a hand to rub at her eyes, either from exhaustion or annoyance or a headache. "I will agree to meet with you, on my terms, if you promise me not to show your face here *or* speak to

Akechi again."

Minako held her hands behind her back so she didn't annoy Sae anymore than she would if she hugged her. "That sounds good to me."

Sae then walked behind her desk and took her seat. "Now," she started as she grabbed a folder from a stack of many folders. "I apologize for the trouble you went through to buy the coffee, but it wouldn't be the first time I've had it cold before. You can leave it and I'll drink it. Assuming you didn't put any of that sugar crap in it."

Minako almost choked on her words, but she turned it into a laugh instead. Her eyes were burning, but she knew better than to cry in front of Sae. She reached for the coffee cups she had abandoned minutes ago, then took a sip out of the one she thought was hers. Once she confirmed it, she dropped the other cup on Sae's desk with a smile.

"The bread will last, too." Sae simply waved her off, so Minako took that note to head for the door.

The moment she was inside the apartment, she dropped onto the couch and *cried* .

Sae wasn't a monster. She was only stressed out about work and she was young and a girl in a man's world and had so many people to please…

No matter what came her way, Sae would always be her little girl.

Chapter 87

Chapter 87

Several weeks ago, if Akihiko knew he would personally escort Makoto to the closest station before she left on her trip, he would have laughed. Or grew angry. Because people were watching him, which meant they would see him with Makoto, and they could reach their own conclusions about their relationship.

The reason he went with Makoto was because he wanted to strike the fear of *god* in Amamiya.

He told Minako he was headed out anyway, which he was, just taking a *slight* detour.

There was a group of teenagers he only knew by reputation waiting for the train that would take them to the airport. Ryuji was on his phone, no surprise, but the blonde girl was the one who noticed Makoto first and walked up to greet her. Her blue eyes landed on him for a second, but she either thought nothing of him or didn't care and pulled Makoto along towards their group.

Amamiya, however, *did* care when he looked over at him. The little voice in the back of his head warned him not to approach the group, but he did anyway. Amamiya needed to know there would be *serious* consequences should anything happen like Minako *worried* would happen.

The closer he got to the teens, the more he noticed Amamiya withdraw into himself. Good. "You guys better stay safe."

It was a pitiful statement, but he needed something honest to say. Ryuji looked up at him and smiled so wide he thought it *hurt* . "Sanada! Ah, man, I'm totally gonna bring you back a souvenir!"

"So you're the guy everyone keeps talking about!" The blonde girl smiled politely and bowed her head. "Ryuji will probably cause *some* problems, but Makoto is going, so she'll keep him in line."

Ryuji lost interest in the conversation and returned back to his phone with a grumble. Akihiko locked eyes with Amamiya. “Don’t do anything stupid.”

His comment worked like he wanted it to. The blonde nodded her head. Ryuji waved his hand. Amamiya straightened his back and turned away, knowing his words had been directed at him.

“I will not be joining them. However, know that I will not be swayed into mischief.” The other boy, Kitawaga, if he remembered correctly, took a step closer to him and bowed.

Makoto came up behind the boy and gave Akihiko a piercing stare. “Thank you for your time, Sanada-san, and I assure you we will all be fine.”

Her eyes were screaming at him to leave them alone, so he shot one last look to Amamiya before he turned to walk back inside the station. “If Makoto tells me any one of you acted up, I’m not afraid to put you in a holding cell for a night or two.”

He could *feel* Makoto burning a hole in his back with her glare, but he walked off before she could say anything. Had he gone overboard? Maybe. Would Amamiya stay the hell away from Makoto? Absolutely.

Sadly for him, the moment he was back on a train heading for Shinjuku, his mind went from overprotective mode to *shit* mode. He had a list of questions and loose ends he hoped Ohya would be willing to provide him, but he didn’t even know for a fact she was going to be there. He wanted all of this confusion to come to an end, but before he spoke to Futaba, he figured speaking with Ohya would help him talk with the young girl without wasting her time.

Akihiko needed something to hold on to. Minako had been acting weird after her talk with Makoto. It worried him because she was being *sly* , like trying to plan something behind his back, which was *never* a good thing. (It was always a good thing, just…very Minako-like to embarrass him…) Mitsuru and Fuuka couldn’t offer too much help with his case, as they were busy with this supposed plot to set up his *boss* for a possible lead.

Everything was a question mark. Nothing was concrete. And he was tired of it. If Ohya wasn't at the bar, then he might indulge himself on several drinks and say fuck it. Maybe go bar hopping with Ken.

But to his delight, when he stepped inside the bar, a familiar face sat at the usual spot and Akihiko exhaled a sigh of relief. He didn't wait for her to notice him, likely too drunk by now anyway, so he pulled out the stool next to her and threw himself into it.

Lala was the first to speak to him. "What's this? No nice friends with you today, huh?"

He heard Ohya gasp loudly beside him, then felt her lean against him like she had fallen asleep. "Oh my god, Lala, look who came back to *see me?"*

Yeah, she was drunk, but she was a weird drunk who sobered up with the right conversation. Maybe it was all a front. It was a good one, he'd give her that. "I need your help with something."

Lala slid him a drink and he was more than eager to take a sip of it. The alcohol, as minor as it was, helped him relax and *not* push the woman off of his shoulder.

"You…need *my* help…with somethin'?"

Akihiko took another drink. "Yeah. I figured who better to ask about Shido than the person who asked me to look into him?"

That was when Ohya sat up straight and the façade dropped. "You're here to ask about Shido?"

He turned to her while fishing out his notepad of questions. "It's still an ongoing investigation, but I do have some questions I would like you to answer."

She stared back at him with a blank look, then shook her head and waved her hand. "Alright. I probably won't know much, but, whatever."

"What happened to Marukami?"

Ohya angrily reached for her drink. “I have no idea. She’s just gone. That’s why I asked *you* .”

It led him right into asking, “So why ask me to investigate Shido if you had no idea if he would be involved?”

Her head fell and a part of him felt bad for asking. “All I can say is that Kayo was not one to care who she found dirt on. It could be a small fry, like you, or it could be the most powerful person in the world.”

Akihiko ignored her personal stab and waited silently for her to continue. “She mentioned him once to me. I didn’t ask for any details, because unlike her, I’m more of a coward. I didn’t want to lose my job over some interest of hers. But of all the cases she was working on, the piles of paperwork on every other person she had looked into, Shido was the *only* file that was missing when I went through her work. There were other documents of corruption on people who were just as important, but untouched. Someone beat me there and stole her stuff on him. I know it.”

He tried to mask his disappointment. “So you don’t know anything about him?”

“Well,” she said, taking a sip of her drink. He felt his heart racing in anticipation. “He’s calling for a snap election, last I heard. So he can run for Prime Minister. Probably not a *good* thing, given his past.”

That was news to him. Not that Akihiko cared much for politics, but he knew what the act of a snap election meant for Japan. The current government was falling apart. The citizens would need the right people in power to restore any damage. And he knew that people were unhappy about the current leadership, but a snap election was more than just a slap to the face.

Ohya added, “People hate living in fear. You know, those acts of terrorism, the Phantom Thieves, and the government doesn’t act on it? They’re too passive. I guess Shido plans to change that.”

The Phantom Thieves .

Did she know about them, too?

“You know about the Phantom Thieves?”

To his surprise, Ohya tilted her head back and laughed. “Are you seriously questioning if I *know* popular topics?”

He could feel his face flush. “Sorry.”

She patted him on the shoulder like he was a child. It annoyed him. “I’m not saying the Phantom Thieves are the terrorists or anything, but they might be. The public would be none the wiser at this point. That’s where I make my money!”

While he was relieved to know Ohya didn’t believe the Phantom Thieves were worth her time, nor were they bad, she still gave him much to think about. If he was right and Shido was the one ordering mental shutdowns, *he* was the one creating the terror. So why would he smile for a camera and condemn the actions of the government if he was only going to replace it with *more* terror…

Was *that* his goal? Was his end goal the cliché bad guy dream of taking over the world?

Was that why he wanted Isshiki’s research?

It wasn’t much, but it was a hell of a start. Nothing confirmed, but the pieces were slowly starting to come together. He would get there, and he knew that when that puzzle was done, Shido would be in that picture.

“Can I ask you something a little different?”

Ohya cocked her head to the side in intrigue, then finished off her drink. “Askin’ me for my number now?”

He groaned into his hand. “Stop that.”

Before he could continue, she laughed at him. “Right, right, you’re *married* .”

“D-Don’t say that so loud!” Thankfully, there wasn’t anyone else in

the bar, but with the hit still looming over his head, the *last* thing he wanted was for a complete stranger to turn that piece of information into the wrong people and have that blow up in his face.

He quickly changed the subject. “Have you ever heard of a Wakaba Isshiki?”

He watched as she tapped her chin in thought while Lala refilled her drink. She was kind enough to do the same to his. “Don’t get too drunk, sweetie.”

“The name is familiar, but not enough for me to tell you anything at the top of my head.” Ohya narrowed her eyes. “Do you know her?”

“Personally, no.” Akihiko questioned if it would be acceptable to tell her what he knew about Isshiki considering she might not have any information for him either way. But, if it helped… “She ran a lab that Shido seemed interested in. But, a few years back, she committed suicide.”

She snapped her fingers. “Oh, yeah, I heard about that. Don’t believe it. Marukami knew something was fishy about that. Sometime later, she started looking into Shido. I wouldn’t be surprised if he had her killed.”

Well, he certainly didn’t expect to hear *that* . “What makes you think that?”

“Dunno, if I’m honest.” She studied the glass in her hands. “But they scarred that poor kid for life. Why in the world would a mother kill herself in front of her daughter? That’s like…the *worst* .”

“You said ‘they’.” He leaned into the counter. “Was Shido not the only person involved?”

Ohya took a deep breath, as if she was irritated with his line of questioning. “I said *they* because *many* people delivered a suicide note to that kid. It was more of a spectacle than a mourning. Like ‘hey, look at what I can do to anyone that crosses me!’”

He appreciated that Ohya was so angry over the death of someone she never knew, but he also didn’t want to attract attention should

anyone walk in. “Okay, so can I ask you if you’ve ever heard of someone else?”

She waved her hand while she brought her drink to her lips. Akihiko turned to face the bar and held his glass with both hands. If Ohya knew anything about his partner, he needed to brace himself. He was either going to be extremely disappointed, or extremely upset.

“Tatsu Iwanaga.”

Again, Ohya lowered her drink and tapped on her chin, but Akihiko held his breath. She *had* to know something. So many people did. They all had questioned him about his health, about what had happened, and why he chose that moment to just… *die.*

But Ohya swiped her drink off the counter and he figured that was going to be his answer. “Surprised you’re asking *me* that.”

Oh. Did that mean she *did* know his partner? “So, you do know him?”

She looked over at him from the top of her glass. “You do too.”

He dropped his head to his chest with his exhale. “Yeah. But nothing about his death made sense to me. So I figured I would see if you knew anything about him that he would have hidden from me. Did he know Shido, or say something about him? Or some other high ranking guy?”

There was a long silence that followed and it made him very uncomfortable. Ohya was not one to be quiet for long, especially when he could see her just staring at the wall of liquor in front of him. She opened her mouth a few times, then shut it. The third time she did it, he pounded the counter.

“Just tell me! He never got the justice he deserved. He didn’t *die* from a heart-attack. Someone *killed* him!”

Ohya took a long, deep inhale, then looked him dead in the eyes. “Kayo was investigating him.”

He thought she was joking at first, but when she looked away, he

thought he was going to be sick. “W-Why?”

She shrugged her shoulders. His hands clenched on his legs. “I don’t know. Honest. But, in good news, I can show up to work early tomorrow and find out. I doubt it has anything to do with Shido, but since you’re still working hard, I’ll do you this little favor.”

He suddenly wished he never asked. “Marukami only investigated corrupt people. Tatsu was a *good* person.”

“Hey, we all have skeletons in our closet,” Ohya replied, hands out in front of her as a sign of peace. Then her attention returned to her drink. “And sometimes, killing someone is the best way to keep them *in* the closet.”

The entire ride home from the bar, his mind kept battling his heart. There was *no way* his partner was a bad person. He was like a brother to him. He was the first person he met when Akihiko moved to Tokyo. If he was still alive and still his partner, he would be someone he could feel comfortable with talking about his family.

Tatsu never asked him questions when he left work early to help take care of a sick Makoto.

Tatsu never questioned his rage when a criminal they had arrested started *bragging* about *raping* teenage girls.

Tatsu never blinked twice at his attitude change during the winter months when all Akihiko thought about was *death* and a daughter he would never see again.

How did any of that make him a *bad* person?

Akihiko tried to think of everything he could to discredit the man. Tatsu was very peculiar about submitting reports. Any arrest he made, he didn’t share the written work with. It was a good thing, right? Maybe *too* independent? When was that a bad thing? He tried not to dive into Tatsu’s personal life, since Akihiko wouldn’t be able to talk about his own. But he never spoke of a girlfriend, a wife, children. He stayed after the shift most nights, extra money maybe? Tatsu *hated* the brass almost as much as Akihiko did…

So why did Marukami want to dig up dirt on Tatsu and *not* his bosses when *they* were the bad guys and his partner was *dead?*

Minako wasn't willing to let him just go to bed like he told her he wanted to. "You look upset."

He flopped back onto the bed, his mind a mess and his heart hurting. "I'm just…I don't know."

She too flopped down on the bed next to him. One of her hands found one of his. "You do know. You don't want to tell."

"Yeah," he replied with a light laugh. Simply being next to her calmed him to the point he thought he could sleep. "I'm just tired of not having all the answers." He twisted his body to lay on his side. His mind faltered for half a second when he noticed her smile, but he was quick to look away before she poked at him. "I feel like I'm so close to knowing what's going on, but then more things happen and nothing works out like I want it to…"

She chuckled to herself as she held her head up with her arm. "Sounds like you could use a vacation, huh?"

Minako came to rest against his side, her head lowering to his shoulder and her hand dropping to his chest. "I wish it was that easy."

She strangely said nothing else to him as she let him coax her to sleep brushing his fingers through her hair. Her even breaths eventually put him out, too. Although he had a bizarre and emotional night, his dreams were nonexistent and he slept rather well.

He assumed that was the only vacation he would get: a dreamless sleep with the only person keeping him from drowning sleeping soundly next to him.

Minako was up before he was, which was alarming enough in its own right. He was up at his normal time, and he figured he should probably go into work that day. He could look up Tatsu. He could keep in contact with Ohya (since they had exchanged business cards) about anything new. So as he grumbled and prepped himself

for the long workday, he tried to keep that annoying voice in his head from putting him in a bad mood first thing in the morning.

He got quite a surprise when Minako sat on the couch in the living room, no breakfast made, and his heart fell in his chest. On a day he was *so hungry* … “You’re up early.”

Minako smiled at him and instantly put him in a better mood. “Yukari said she wanted to see Tokyo, so she’s picking me up in a few minutes. We can take you to work, if you want.”

He almost told her no, especially since he would be on his own for food, but there was a warmth emanating from her that he just could *not* refuse. “Are you planning on dropping by a convenience store so I can have something for breakfast?”

She laughed at him, then lifted her bag onto her shoulders. “I think we can do that. C’mon!”

He was going to question her unusual excitement when she looped her arm through his and literally pulled him out of the building. Once they were outside, she released him and waved over Yukari. Their friend sure looked like she was dressed for a warm end of summer day, but again, he found the idle banter between the two of them *off* .

“You work in *that?”*

Akihiko stiffened at Yukari’s sharp tone. Didn’t all higher-ranking cops and detectives wear suits and ties? Didn’t most Japanese *men* wear business formal to work? Why was it *him* that set her off?

Well, it was Yukari. Always and forever the fashion police. Minako was nice enough to come to his defense. “Hey now, I think he’s very handsome.”

He puffed his chest in pride. If Yukari wouldn’t have rolled her eyes and walked towards her car, Akihiko might have said something witty in response. Or done something stupid like kissing Minako in public. Not that he’d never done that before, but it was a busy commute time. The building tenants had no idea they even *knew*

each other. Best to keep it that way.

So, he stole a kiss from Minako once he slid himself into the backseat of Yukari's car. Yukari scoffed at him. Minako beamed at him. "Be lucky I'm ending it like that."

Minako threw her face into his shoulder and *laughed* . Yukari groaned and turned from her seat to glare at the both of them. "I swear to the gods if you don't keep your man contained I'm going to stop at the first stoplight and kick him out and leave him here!"

Akihiko let Minako lean into him and draped his arm over her shoulder to further infuriate Yukari. "I'd like to see you try that."

Minako laughed into his chest while Yukari growled and started the car. While he would *never* do anything *scandalous* in front of anyone, in the back of a *car* , it was very, *very* difficult to think about what he was going to have for breakfast when Minako's hand kept dancing up and down his thigh. How the hell she managed to have a perfectly *normal* conversation with Yukari *knowing* what she was doing was beyond him. He eventually stopped her by dropping his hand over hers, then she chuckled again and muttered a pitiful apology.

That was when his mind was clear enough to realize they were on the freeway headed *out* of Tokyo. "Um. Where are you going?"

While he figured he could show up and work a second shift if they were going for breakfast, he wished he *knew* . He didn't have to wear a damn suit that was making him more uncomfortable as the minutes ticked on by.

But *damn* they were going a long ways for breakfast when ten more minutes passed without a word from either of the two women. Finally, realizing they were too far away for them to be taking him out to breakfast, he pushed Minako back by her shoulders. He *knew* something was happening when she smiled at him.

"What's going on?"

"Oh my god, Minako. Just tell him."

Minako, in turn, threw herself back into him, wrapping both of her arms around one of his. “You said you needed a vacation. So we’re going on one!”

That had been why she had been so secretive lately. She *planned* this. Akihiko was touched by it, he really was, but… “I needed to go into work today.”

But Minako waved a hand in front of her face. “Mitsuru said she had that taken care of.”

He sighed, defeated, yet not at all upset that he had a reason not to go into work. “And I’m assuming you packed for me? I *really* don’t want to wear this on a vacation.”

“Well of course.” She tilted her head to look up at him. “Yukari made me. I told her I wouldn’t mind if you walked around the beach resort naked.”

…Did she seriously say that *out loud?*

“Wouldn’t be any worse than that trip to Yakushima and someone thought it was okay to wear a damn speedo to the beach!”

And Yukari was *still* holding that over his head?!

He lifted his free hand to cover his face, but he was pretty sure Minako (and probably Yukari) could tell he was on fire. It was still summer. He was hot enough already! Now he was literally *choking* because his collar was too tight against his throat.

“I packed him one, don’t you worry!”

Akihiko was sure he was going to either burn alive or get thrown from the car by a disgusted Yukari.

Either way, he knew he was going to die.

Chapter 88

Chapter 88

Minako was very nervous as she made her way inside the hotel.

She was still on the fence about if Akihiko was actually excited or not. The fact he was putting distance between the two of them as she walked inside upset her. No one in the city would have *any* idea who he was, who she was, so they could act like a *real* couple for once. She told herself he was just embarrassed because her and Yukari kept pestering him the entire drive. Now that he was free from that, he wanted his space to catch his breath and cool down.

Mitsuru had been kind enough to front the money for the vacation since Minako didn't want Akihiko to find out about it if he were to notice missing money. But once inside, she stopped to look around at how beautiful the view was. While she told Mitsuru she didn't mind dropping some extra money on a nice place to stay, she suddenly worried how much *extra* it was going to cost her. The pictures only did so much for her understanding…

But if it all made Akihiko smile, she would hand Mitsuru all she had to her name.

With her room key in hand, Minako turned to fetch Akihiko and gauge his interest now that he had time to calm down. She tried not to get too excited when she spotted him inside by the window, staring out at the crystal clear waters. He had left his outer layers in the car, complaining about being too hot, and while his sharp red dress shirt made him look out of place at a beach resort, she was still stricken by the sight of him. She came up behind him and slowly wrapped her arms around his middle, chuckling into his back when she startled him.

"It's beautiful, huh?"

When was the last time they had even been to the sea? When was the last time they had left Tokyo? When was the last time she had

gone out with her other friends? There was a pang of sadness in her heart, knowing it had been *years* , and she vowed to make this trip one of the best ever. She owed Akihiko that much. She figured she owed it to Yukari, Fuuka, Mitsuru, and Junpei, who had all been able to make it. She would make it up to Ken and Aigis soon.

She also liked to think *she* deserved a vacation.

“I guess it all makes sense now.”

Minako came to stand by his side, her arms still wrapped loosely around him, and looked up at him. “Oh?”

And she saw it. The smile. His happiness. She could have melted then and there. “You were acting so odd lately. I figured you were up to something, but I wasn’t expecting *this* .”

“I know you hate being away from the action, but you were so tired.” She held onto him tighter. “So I figured that I had my chance to surprise you when Makoto told me she was going to go on that trip.”

He smiled down at her. “I’m glad you forced me into this.” One of his arms moved around her back. “I wouldn’t have come here any other way. Especially if I knew Junpei would be meeting us here.”

Minako shifted in his hold to grab both of his hands and stand in front of him and tried to bite back her laugh. “We’re only here for two nights. I don’t want you to think about work, or the kids, or anything else besides relaxing and having fun. Maybe not murdering Junpei or being murdered by Yukari. Because you promised me that we would spend this time together if Makoto left.”

He lightly nodded his head while gently pulling her back into him. He didn’t say anything to her, but eventually, her shoulder started to grow numb from holding her bag too long, so she carefully pushed off of him. “Let’s go see our room!”

Akihiko nodded, then reached for the bag that was hurting her shoulder. “I can take it. Unless you have another one?”

“C’mon now,” she said with a laugh. “We’re only here for a few days. I didn’t have to pack much.”

He ran a hand through his hair and looked away. Minako tried not to laugh at how cute he was. “Did you seriously pack a speedo?”

She threw her hand over her mouth to hide her smile. Akihiko groaned in response and turned away from her, and by the time she caught up with him down the hall, she had tears in her eyes. “I don’t need an excuse to *look* at you, but I thought it would be cute!”

She grabbed his hand at the elevators, but he refused to meet her eyes. “I’m not young anymore.”

Poking his ribs, Minako teased, “Bet you’d still look super sexy.”

If she hadn’t been holding his hand, she would make a bet that he would have taken off for the stairs instead of waiting with her. Once they were both inside the elevator and heading up to their floor, Akihiko tried to even the playing field. “So. What are you going to wear, then?”

Truth be told, she really didn’t want to answer his question. The years had been almost *too* kind to him. Akihiko still looked very young, except on days where he was tired and stressed. Minako could put a side by side picture of him when they were first married and one of him now and there would be some differences, but not a lot.

With her, on the other hand, she didn’t fare so well. She didn’t have to fight every day like she did in high school, so she stopped training. Granted she ate decently well, thanks to Akihiko and Makoto being oddly health conscious, but that was her only saving grace. She didn’t think herself *fat* by any means, and she was relatively active, but she sure as hell wasn’t “thin” enough to feel comfortable showing off her body like she used to.

“It’s a surprise,” was all she told him. To her delight, it annoyed him, and he didn’t ask for any other details. He did cast curious looks to her every now and then until she managed to find their room. She could feel his eyes on her as she fumbled with the key card and quickly opened the door. Why she was so nervous, she could guess. He was thinking about something that had to do with her and the beach. She felt she would disappoint him, but he wouldn’t care,

right? But damn it, she *hated* when he stared at her while she was doing something because it made her feel very… *on edge.*

But she didn't feel that way for too long.

For two reasons.

One: the room was *beautiful* . There was a perfect view of the sea, a spacious balcony to walk out and sit and listen to the waves crash against the shore. The room itself was on the large side; hardwood floors, a very big bed, a fancy dresser, a matching cool color scheme to work well with the water directly outside their window. She had no idea Mitsuru went *this* far for a *two night* stay…

The second reason: once the door clicked shut behind them, Minako was given two or three seconds to soak up the view before she felt Akihiko's hand reach around her and turn her towards him. A second later, he pushed her into him and kissed her to the point she thought her knees would give out. She counted herself lucky that he was strong enough to support her because she definitely felt weak. Akihiko wasn't one for initiating anything beyond a simple and quick kiss, even behind closed doors, so any time he acted like this, she soaked it up.

Plus, who was *she* to deny *him?*

As his lips left hers to leave a trail of kisses from her mouth, jaw, and neck, she was beyond grateful she only had to deal with one shirt and a few buttons. She made quick work of removing it from his shoulders, but her hands didn't get to travel too much more as Akihiko carefully lowered her onto the bed. It was *very* comfortable. That, mixed in with the mid-afternoon sun casting him in a glow above her, it made her feel like she had died and found herself in heaven.

Minako lifted a hand to sweep at the fringes of his hair once he pulled away from their recent kiss. "I'm not used to you surprising me like this."

He laughed softly as she traced the muscles in his shoulders, the sound of his laughter echoing in her bones. "Sometimes, I forget

how important you are to me." A look of panic came over his face, then he pushed himself up as far as she would let him. "I-I mean, you're always important to me…"

It was her turn to laugh. "I know what you're saying, Aki." She could feel the tension leave his shoulders and he dropped his weight to his forearms, lingering a few centimeters away from her lips.

"You did all of this…for the two of *us* . But at the same time, you did it for me," he whispered, his breath warm on her cheeks. "You mean the world to me. You always know when I'm drowning, and you're always there to save me."

She held his face between both of her hands. "I want you to be happy. Your happiness is my happiness. So when you're drowning, I'm drowning. Sometimes you save me, but for once, I want to save you."

He turned his head to kiss one of her palms. "Minako, just by being with me, you keep me going. I know we don't see eye to eye all the time, but had I ever been alone, I would have given up." One of his hands brushed a lock of hair off of her face. "And I know you've sacrificed so much because of me, so I want to make *you* happy. Whether that's just us sitting at home and sleeping all day or going on trips to the beach where you make me walk around naked or in a speedo, I would do it for you in a heartbeat."

She was such a jumble of emotions, but she was so *happy* that she couldn't contain the bubble of laughter that erupted from her chest. Sometimes, she forgot how much she *loved* him, so much that it *hurt* . "I think I'll spare Yukari the frustration."

His hands moved to her back to help her sit up, then she felt his fingers gripping the edge of her shirt. He leaned in to kiss her neck again with a grin on his face. "Don't invite her then."

Once he had removed her shirt and she was comfortable underneath him again, she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him into her for another kiss. "We do have dinner plans in an hour. We probably don't have time for this."

“We can be fashionably late.”

Gods, when he talked like this to her in that rough, husky tone, it was unbelievably *hot* . “Mitsuru won’t be too pleased.”

He lowered his head to kiss the pulse point in her neck. She knew no matter what she said at this point, he wasn’t going to listen to her. It made her dizzy. “Then we’ll run there. Burn off even more calories.”

She didn’t try and stop him a third time.

She *did* have to stop him before they walked into the restaurant, a place a little more classy than she expected, because he had been in such a rush to get ready and missed a button on the top of his shirt. Minako giggled when he blushed, but he at least allowed her to straighten his shirt out, button it *correctly* , then grab his hand like they hadn’t run three blocks to arrive ten minutes late.

“You’re late.”

Beside her, she heard Akihiko clear his throat as she took the seat next to a curious Yukari. “Uh, y-yeah…”

Mitsuru didn’t appear to be too happy with his remark, but she didn’t say anything more to him about their late arrival. Yukari leaned over in her seat to ask a question that Minako already knew she would ask. “So. Did you forget about this?”

Minako loved to embarrass Yukari almost as much as she loved to tease Akihiko. “No, not really. Someone was just okay being fashionably late.”

Yukari narrowed her eyes. “And why’s that?”

“Don’t ask questions you know the answer to and don’t want to know.”

She heard her friend grumble off to her side, then turned to start a new conversation with Fuuka. Minako caught Akihiko’s eyes, but as soon as she smiled at him, he looked away with a light blush on his face.

The dinner was a pleasant affair. Junpei and Akihiko got carried away in conversations about fitness and baseball. Minako spoke more with Fuuka than Yukari and Mitsuru since she had been in contact with the other two more often than her. She learned Fuuka was still living back in Iwatodai and was in Tokyo to help Mitsuru on a mission. Minako *almost* asked about the mission, since it likely involved Ken and Akihiko as well, but she didn't want to darken the mood. They all chimed in about a variety of topics here and there, and Minako's heart was so full of emotion by simply being with all of them again.

They all lost track of time. Minako and Yukari were rambling away about their high school trip to Yakushima, to which Junpei chimed in about their "babe hunting" disaster and Akihiko huffed in annoyance, but then took her by surprise.

He looked directly at her and smiled. "I already knew I found my babe."

She *almost* spit out her wine.

"I hate you two."

It was then that Minako realized that her and Akihiko were the only couple there. Mitsuru had long since told them she was married to her job. She had no idea if Fuuka was married, but since they were friends, she would have told her, hopefully. Junpei had a wife, she knew that much, but she didn't come with him to Tokyo for reasons she didn't know and didn't feel comfortable asking. Yukari had been married once, but she put an end to that when she told her he was only into her for the money. While she liked to tell Minako that she was perfectly fine being single, sometimes she wondered if Yukari got jealous of her relationship with Akihiko.

Maybe she could tone down the flirting with the others around. The last thing she wanted to do was offend her friends.

Her friends all decided they were going to go find a place to sit and drink (Yukari's idea, and Minako could not *believe* Mitsuru and Fuuka were okay going), but once they were out of the restaurant, Yukari put a hand on her shoulder to stop her.

“Not you. I don’t want to listen to your graphic relationship stories for the rest of the night.”

Sometimes, it was hard to tell if Yukari was being sarcastic or serious. “I don’t mean to offend you.”

Her heart lightened when her friend chuckled. “I know you’ve been upset lately, so you need to spend this time with Akihiko. This is why you planned this in the first place. We can all hang out together tomorrow.” Then came the rolling of the eyes. “I’m sure you want to take some kind of moonlight walk on the beach since you’ve never been able to do it before.”

Minako gave her a smile. “I would like that, yes, but I want to hang out with all of you, too. I see him every day.”

“Minako,” Yukari started with a sigh. “I’m not trying to say that I don’t want you to come out with us, but this night should be for the two of you. When was the last time you two did something nice together?” Minako could feel her eyes tearing up. “You’ve both been through hell. So I don’t want to hear you bitch anymore until you take that damn walk on the beach! You’re going to be stuck with everyone tomorrow, so really, you’ll thank me for this.”

She told herself not to hug Yukari, but she couldn’t stop herself. “I’ll make sure to tell you every little detail as thanks.”

Yukari groaned as she pushed her off of her. “As thanks, you should spare me the details.”

A few minutes later, Akihiko came up to the two of them with a frown on his face. Yukari gave her a light push and knocked her into him. Before Akihiko had a chance to question the action, Yukari turned and walked across the street towards where the others had gone moments ago.

“Um.” He was nervous, and it was cute, but she didn’t question him. “S-So, did you want to go with them?”

She leaned into him with a smile, shaking her head lightly. “Yukari told me we were banned.”

He stiffened immediately. “Why? Because we were a few minutes late to dinner?”

“No,” she replied with a laugh. “There’s…something I want to do with you.”

Her voice was quiet, but Akihiko was still tense. “O-Oh…okay?”

She thought it wise not to make him anymore nervous. “I want to take a walk on the beach with you.”

She could feel his exhale and the tension left with his breath. He was oddly quiet afterwards, but Minako grabbed his hand and began pulling him along towards the coast. He never said anything to her, not that it bothered her, but there was a weight on her chest that made her worry he was *thinking* and it made her think.

Did he not want to spend the evening walking on the beach? It was a clear night, and she had *always* wanted to walk hand in hand with that special guy with the moon reflecting in the water and her feet in the sand…

Did he want to go with their friends? Would that have been more fun for him?

She knew at this point, she was going to have to ask him or she would ruin the night for herself. When they reached the edge of the beach, she tugged on his hand before he could take the first step into the sand. He gave her a confused look, which became more pertinent when she looked away from him and dropped his hand.

“What’s wrong?”

Minako smiled sadly at the grass by her feet. “We don’t have to do this if you don’t want to.”

Akihiko struggled for a few seconds to say something. He was looking for a way out of the situation, and her heart hurt seeing it. “Aki, it’s okay. We can do something else, or we can go meet up with our friends-,”

“No.” He then narrowed his eyes like he usually did when he made

up his mind. “I want to do this with you.”

She didn’t want to doubt his dedication, but even after he grabbed her hand and forced her to follow after him, she still felt like he was doing this for the wrong reasons. “Honey, please. It’s okay.”

When he came to a stop, his head fell to his chest in defeat. Her heart fell to her stomach. “Minako, I know you feel like you force me to do all these romantic things with you, but maybe I’m starting to see what I’ve done to you. By asking you to hide, by asking you to *lie* , I’ve taken so much away from you. Please. Please let me do this now. It might not be enough to ask you to forgive me, but…like you said, your happiness is my happiness.”

He looked at her then, the moonlight reflecting in his eyes, and the rest of the world faded around her. “Aki…”

“So, c’mon!” He pulled on her hand again and she all but fell into him as she lost her footing. “Walking after a meal is a great way to stay healthy, you know.”

She wrapped her arms around him and hugged him tightly. She buried her face into his chest to hide her tears, but the sound of her laughter was muffled by his shirt. He at least returned the embrace and kissed the top of her head.

“I love you, Minako.”

As much as she tried not to, she cried harder into him. He simply held her, occasionally running his hand up and down her spine. When she felt like she had cried enough, she pulled back in his arms to find him looking down at her like she was the most precious thing in the world. It made her heart skip a beat.

“I would go through it all over again, day by day, if that meant I got to spend it with you.” She lifted a hand to wipe at her eyes. “Because I love you. So much. Enough to forgive you for taking this time to be romantic and turning it into a workout.”

His eyes glistened in the light, but before he had a chance to defend himself, she leaned forward and kissed him. It was nothing

impressive, but she melted into him anyway. She may have waited years for this chance with him, hand in hand on a deserted moon-lit beach, but it was worth it.

They didn't really speak much after that, but Akihiko released her so she could pretend she was a young adult and seeing the sea for the first time. She didn't wander too far into the water, just enough that it covered her bare feet, then she ran back to Akihiko and held his hand and walked around in silence. It was extremely calming, holding his hand, listening to the waves, looking ahead at the terrain painted silver. She almost didn't want to go back to their room and call it a night, but one look into his eyes and seeing that smile on his face had her wanting the opposite.

And after a quick shower to wash her hair free of small traces of sand, Minako realized how tired she was. She certainly wasn't as young and spry as she needed to be to last as long as she wanted to once he finished taking his shower. But, she curled up next to him, happy and content, and had one of the best sleeps of her life.

Minako woke up to the sound of the waves breaking on the shore and a light warmth from the sun in the room. It was peaceful enough that she rolled over and almost fell back asleep. What stopped her was that she realized Akihiko wasn't in bed next to her. It wasn't unusual, in fact he was *rarely* in bed when she woke up, but it would have been nice. Just so she knew he was resting as well as she had been.

"Good morning."

She grabbed at the sheets in a panic, then narrowed her eyes as Akihiko sat next to her on the bed. He was dressed for the beach, and she immediately forgave him for not being in bed next to her since she *rarely* saw him look so *casual.* Simple white t-shirt. Simple khaki shorts. He even had sunglasses pushed up into his hair.

She sat up so she could study him even better. "Well, don't you look nice."

He chuckled at her. "Nice? I look like I'm a dad going to the gym on a summer day."

If he got any more cuter on this trip, she would refuse to return home. “I hope you’re not headed to the gym.”

“I already went earlier this morning.” She narrowed her eyes at him, causing him to lean away from her. “Sorry. I slept great, though. Haven’t slept like that in years.”

Hearing that made her smile brightly. “Good. I was worried you didn’t sleep well and that was why you were up…”

Akihiko shook his head. “Nah, I slept *too* well, I guess. Plus, it’s beautiful outside. You should get ready. As much as I’d love to stay here with you all day, it’d be a shame to waste this trip.”

“Yeah,” she said with a laugh. “It would be rude to hog you all to myself all day. Tonight, well, that’s a different story.”

She smiled at him again as she threw the sheets off of her to start prepping for the day out. Akihiko remained on the bed, likely recovering from her remark, but then he shook his head and threw himself to his feet. “Well, Junpei is already down saving us a spot, so make sure you eat something for breakfast before meeting up with us.”

She gave him a look that froze him in his spot. “What, you don’t want to wait for me?”

Akihiko coughed into his hand, then walked to the door and grabbed the bag on the floor. “D-Don’t take too long.”

And he was gone before she could stop him. Minako found his behavior interesting, but she figured he was embarrassed and was worried he couldn’t handle her relentless teasing all day while he was with their friends. She would go easy on him, or at least, to his face. She was sure Yukari was *dying* to hear about their late night romantic adventure.

Her friend met her in the lobby, looking almost the same as she did when they went on their trip in high school. Yukari held her gaze until they were standing next to each other, but when Minako smiled, Yukari held up a hand. “No. I don’t want to hear it.”

“But I told you I would tell you the details.”

“No,” Yukari replied angrily. “I told *you* that I *didn’t* want to hear it.”

Minako chuckled at her as she dropped her sunglasses down over her eyes. “C’mon. Aki said Junpei was in charge of getting us seats. He probably did a terrible job.”

Her friend laughed lightly with her. “Probably right next to the girls and the bar…”

A morning drink on vacation on a beach sounded *wonderful* . Not that she had much to drink alcohol wise since that night weeks ago in Shinjuku, but…it was a vacation.

They both stepped out into the sun and found the two men with Fuuka under a parasol with the correct amount of chairs. It wasn’t as close to the bar as she thought it would be, which was fine. There were a few other groups of people and families out, but nothing overwhelming. Minako took the seat next to Akihiko, who was still wearing his shirt and clearly he didn’t intend on running around the beach in *khakis* .

Minako stood next to one of the chairs and looked around their tiny little area. “Um, where’s Mitsuru?”

Fuuka placed her towel over her chair, then looked up at her. “She has a few things to do business wise, but she said she would be free this afternoon! We have all day!”

She flopped down on the chair while Junpei tossed *his* shirt over one of the chairs. “Man, do you think I could get a free drink or two if I took one of you ladies with me?”

Of course, Yukari was ready with a retort. “I’m sure they’d be more than happy to give you free water. Maybe even a slice of lemon with it.”

Fuuka giggled into her hands. “It might be for the best. People tend to neglect staying hydrated out on the beach!”

Minako tossed a look over to Akihiko, thinking it was his moment to

chime in, but he remained quiet. She thought he was just waiting for her to pounce on him, but even after two hours had passed, he never once moved from his chair or said much outside of answering a direct question. After their first round of “breakfast” drinks, her friends all took off towards the water. It was then that she realized they had left her alone with Akihiko, and she was *dying* to know why he was being so awkward.

“You’re being awfully quiet, Aki.”

He looked at her for a split second, then quickly looked away. “O-Oh, y-yeah.”

“Something wrong?”

She watched him grip at his knees, but she couldn’t tell if it was because he was angry or nervous. He couldn’t be mad at her, right? She wasn’t about to tell him that she had forgotten to eat breakfast and that one drink already had her a little dizzy…

But then he exhaled deeply and looked around, as if checking to make sure the coast was clear. She found it odd, but her eyes followed him as he came to his feet and took another deep breath. It was hard not to demand him to take his shirt off…

“Sorry.” His voice was quiet. It made her body tingle. “I, uh…scouted out the place this morning.”

He wasn’t making any sense. “Okay?”

He inhaled again and exhaled slowly. He was nervous, she knew that now, but she didn’t know *why*. Their friends weren’t even paying attention to them. Hell, Yukari had just shoved Junpei for something he probably said and he fell into the sea while Fuuka laughed from her spot on the edge of the shore.

She focused back on him when he cleared his throat. “So…yeah. Hell, I had this all planned out in my head and now I’m screwing it up.”

Minako tried not to laugh at how cute he was, but the small amount of alcohol in her blood brought it out of her anyway. She opened her

mouth to say something to him, but that was when he made a move for the edges of his shirt. Now, she had seen him shirtless many times, but sitting a few centimeters away *watching* him take his shirt off, *in public,* made her brain shut off.

But he didn't stop with his shirt.

She didn't know if she was more intoxicated than she thought or if he was just taking his time to torture her. She almost reached out and took his shorts off for him, but when she was able to tell her hand to *move* , she was a little too late.

In fact, she was pretty sure she was *dead* .

Akihiko was wearing the speedo she had packed for him.

It was supposed to be a joke. Well, Minako really *wanted* to see him wear it, but never thought he actually *would* . She was pretty sure Yukari threw in a pair of swim shorts for him, so Akihiko *had* the option.

She loved him. He was doing this for her. Because she had told him it would be *cute.*

Her hand covered her mouth on reflex and blood pumped painfully in her ears. She was hard to fluster, *way* harder than Akihiko was, but she sat in her chair, probably looking like a giant tomato in the shade. She was glad she was in the shade or she was sure she would have combusted right there on the spot.

No matter how old he got, he would always be *gorgeous.*

She had also seen him naked on *many* occasions, but not like this. The angle of the sun hit him perfectly, accentuating the definition and dips of his muscles. She felt a sharp pang of regret when she saw the scar on his right knee, a mark that she was *not* used to seeing and *not* something she wanted to think about. So she lifted her eyes, making sure to admire his thighs, his abs, the v of his hips. Gods she wanted to lean forward and *kiss* him and touch him because *looking* wasn't enough…

She realized where *that* was headed, then jerked back and threw

her free hand over the other.

Akihiko, bless his heart, took her reaction the wrong way. “Um… sorry. I-I thought you s-said…”

Minako shielded her face with both hands as she laughed behind her personal barrier. “Oh my god, Aki, I can *not* believe you did this!” She immediately waved a hand at him to cut him off when she heard him stumbling for words. “W-Wow! I…I have no idea what to say to you!”

When she was able to lower her hands, he frowned deeply and dropped himself back into his chair. “I didn’t mean to frustrate you.”

Oh, she was frustrated all right. Just not in the way he thought. “This has…” She laughed again because she couldn’t help herself, then found the strength to lift her hand to rest on his knee. “I wish you knew how happy this made me.”

And there it was. The glow of pride. His back straightened and he smiled like he had just saved the world when no one had given him a chance. “Well, then I’m glad, too.”

He pushed himself up and did a few basic stretches, something Minako, again, had to cover her face for or she would jump him in public. With their friends not that far away.

She could tell he noticed her reaction by the teasing tone in his voice. “What? I thought you were happy?”

Minako ignored him as best she could.

Akihiko chuckled a minute later. “I thought that I could make use of this and go for a swim. I’m sure Yukari won’t be too thrilled, so I should probably do it now and get it over with.”

But before he could walk off, she grabbed his wrist. “C’mon, you don’t have to do this. I love it, don’t get me wrong, but I don’t want you to be on edge all day.”

“I’m okay.” He said it in such a way that warmed her heart. He needed to stop that. She was burning up enough as it was. “Your

opinion is the only one I care about."

She had to turn the tables and she had to turn them *now* . "Okay, well, it's not good for you to be out in the sun for a long time without sunscreen."

And the tables had turned. "O-Oh…"

Minako dropped her arm and twisted in her seat to rummage through their bag. She chuckled to herself when she saw Akihiko slowly ease himself down into the chair in front of her. "I-I can do it."

"No." She met his eyes. Now there were *two* tomatoes in the shade. "You're gonna have a hard time doing this on your own. I sure don't want you to be in pain tomorrow because you didn't let me help you."

Needless to say, their beach day was cut *very* short. The second she *touched* him, she made some pitiful excuse to Yukari about needing to go get more sunscreen from their room, but her friend didn't even blink.

"You don't need an excuse, Minako. Just make sure you bring Akihiko back at some point before I drown Junpei and need to discuss my alibi."

She didn't need to be told twice.

Chapter 89

Chapter 89

Akihiko lived his life as a morning person, but for once, all he wanted to do was stay in bed.

They had to leave that morning, to return home where he was *positive* shit would hit the fan, so he wanted to hold on to what little time he had to himself while he had it. He made sure to ask Minako what time they had to check out, and he made sure to let her know that they weren't leaving a minute earlier.

He remembered telling her that he wouldn't have taken this little trip had she not forced him on it. Even if it was just two days, he *needed* this break. He needed this time with Minako. And he would forever cherish every second of it.

Minako wasn't the morning person he was. He was grateful for that at the moment. The sun was just starting to break over the horizon, the first rays of light illuminating their room. He was able to lay there with no obligation to do *anything* , save for admiring the woman who was sleeping soundly next to him. It wasn't unusual for him to watch her sleep, given he hardly ever slept, but the colors of the room and the glow of the sun cast her in a light that made her look like some kind of angel. He reached out with one hand to brush a strand of hair off of her face, letting his fingertips graze her cheek, but careful not to wake her.

He owed her *so* much. She had missed out on so many chances to be that romantic high-school girl she always claimed to be because of him. He had seen that personality flare to life on their trip, but what he did his best to keep hidden from her, was how much it *hurt* .

He didn't deserve her. There was a world filled with guys that could have treated her better, given her the kids she wanted, taken her to beaches and out to dinner and…

"Good morning, handsome."

The hand he propped himself up with fell to his pillow hearing Minako's voice. Had he woken her? He thought he was being quiet and still… "Ah, you're up early."

She smiled at him, her eyes adjusting to the morning light, then she placed her hand over the one that had fallen to her shoulder. "I want to spend as much time with you as I can before we go back home."

Her words were meant to be cute, her tone playful, her eyes shining, but Akihiko took them as a dagger. Because once they were home, she figured he would be distant. Strick. A terrible husband.

But this trip also made him realize how her happiness made *him* feel. To be honest, she made him feel like he was in his twenties and giddy about being newlyweds. All he wanted to do was impress her, to bring back the smile that reached her eyes, to make her blush over words he stumbled over.

Gods, he would never forget that look on her face yesterday, sitting under the umbrella, struck dumb because he *really* did muster the courage to wear that damn speedo.

He had denied her all of her desires and wants for *years* , but no more. Once they returned and arrested his boss (hopefully) for his part in the hit and they got more answers and names, he would do anything with her.

He felt a poke to his chest and found Minako grinning at him from her spot on the bed. "Whatcha thinking about?"

He returned her smile, letting his fingers weave in and out of her hair. "I was thinking about going home, having to go back to the shitty life we've made for ourselves. Well, that I made for *you.* "

A frown came to her face. "Aki. Don't do this. Please. I can't tell you how much these last few days have meant to me. I just want to *be* with you."

"Oh, I know." The confidence in his voice was not missed by Minako. "But if anything, I've realized how much *I've* needed all of this. How much I've needed *you* . And I'm not about to just leave that here in

this room, or on the beach, or in this town."

Her eyes widened in surprised confusion. "W-What does that mean?"

Akihiko sat up on the bed, then turned to her and looked into her eyes. She was so beautiful. "It means I want to do this back home, too. Hell, I *need* to, or I'm going to lose my mind by the end of the week."

She opened her mouth to say something, but after several minutes, he held up a hand to stop her thoughts. "Minako, I've denied you so much in the past. But I won't deny you anything else. I don't want to go around and tell every single person that we're married, because it's none of their business, and I doubt anyone would believe me now. But I won't let my fear of being discovered ruin the rest of my life with you. I saw a smile from you I haven't seen since we were married. I saw that sparkle in your eyes. And I don't want to sound selfish by any means, but this is what I've missed, too."

Minako heaved a sigh as she sat up with him. It shot a jolt of fear down his spine. "Aki, I know you feel like everything that's gone wrong is your fault and your fault alone, but what I don't think I get through to you enough is that I would have walked this path a thousand times because I want to be with *you. You* are what's important to me. Not the adventures we may or may not go on, or the heartache we both put each other through. *You*, Aki, are all I want in my life. Everything else is just a nice bonus."

He felt like he had waited his entire life for this moment, even if he tried to tell himself in the past that if Minako truly hated him, she would have left him. Maybe it was how she spoke to him. Maybe it was the happiness he had felt for the past few days. Maybe he was finally *listening* .

"I still want to go out from time to time," he told her, the words hushed by the emotion building in his chest. "I would do anything for you. I *want* to do everything for you."

He reached out to stop her from wiping at her eyes. "Okay, okay, let's just…take it day by day. I don't want you to have to be scared

or worried, so…we can just walk around the city like I thought about before! There's so much of Tokyo we haven't seen yet!"

There were still tears in her eyes, but her voice was happy, her smile big and bright, and it knocked the wind out of him. Something as simple as sightseeing was all she wanted, but he wouldn't let himself feel *guilty* over not taking her out before. He would make it up to her. And he would start *now* .

True to his word, they didn't leave their room until Yukari came pounding on the door demanding them to "wrap it up" or they would get left behind. Minako made it *very* hard to pack the rest of their stuff and head down to the lobby, but he wouldn't be working that day anyway with the long drive home. When he told her as much, Minako relented. They both met with Junpei and Mitsuru, and when Mitsuru nodded her head to speak to him away from the others, Akihiko almost told her no.

He squeezed Minako's hand, but she only smiled at him and walked off to talk to Junpei. He met Mitsuru outside, the sun having to fight against a few clouds forming overhead. It would probably rain on their way back home, but it didn't matter now. How they had gotten lucky enough to have perfect weather, well, it was deserved. And he was thankful.

"You couldn't wait to talk to me until tomorrow?"

Mitsuru continued to stare out at the sea. "I'd rather not bombard you with every detail last minute." She turned to face him. "This will happen tomorrow. Fuuka will be monitoring the situation on our return back to Tokyo. Junpei has already been in contact with Masami about the money, but he will be meeting him face to face tomorrow night. I would advise you to go into work and *act* normal. He may say something to you. He may not. I also ask that you do not stay for longer than necessary. Fuuka will keep you updated as things develop."

He *really* didn't want to worry about all of this now, but this was a make or break kind of thing. If his boss was really working with people that were purposely trying to *kill* him and they got some of those names, it could be a huge break. But, if it was just Mitsuru

being overly cautious about something technological and it provided *nothing* , then they were back to square one.

“How do you know he’s going to rat out his friends?”

Mitsuru pulled out her phone to check the time. “Fuuka ran his name through a variety of databases. Turns out, this “respectable” cop is in a fair amount of debt to several people. He’s been able to avoid hearings and court appearances for reasons unknown, at the moment, but we will not be so easily swayed. However, we do need to be prepared in case it’s a front and he threatens to use violence if he doesn’t have the money.”

Akihiko didn’t really like what he heard, but he could work with it. Debts were common in the criminal underworld, but he had no idea how he could use *this* case to his advantage. If everything worked out according to plan, then perhaps they would be fine. He could slap his boss with one criminal charge and the others would open up with it. In order to keep all that a secret, they needed *names* .

If the plan failed in any regards, he would have to think quickly on the spot. He could do it, maybe, *hopefully* , but this wasn’t a teenage criminal he was going up against. He had to be smart. He had to be prepared.

He felt Mitsuru’s hand on his arm. “Everything will be fine, Akihiko. Trust me.”

Thankfully, Minako was able to keep his mind from spinning out of control on the drive back. She was more interested in planning future trips than reminiscing about the recent one, and it made his heart flutter. She spoke with excitement, listing off places she wanted to see, day trips they could make over the weekend, little odd and end shops and restaurants that seemed interesting. It made it so much easier to tune out Yukari’s jabs at him when Minako was off in her own world.

Minako was so much in her own little world that she walked inside their apartment building without realizing Akihiko had stayed behind. Yukari leaned back against the car door while he grabbed the bag from the back of her car. As much as he wanted to stay in his little

bubble of happiness and vacation planning, he knew what was coming. He had to face it sooner rather than later.

“I hope you don’t bring up any of your disgust for me tomorrow night.” He came to stand next to Yukari. “He’ll know right away you’re lying.”

She waved a hand in front of her dismissively. “I can’t believe you wore… *that* to the beach at your age!”

He puffed his chest. “Minako very much liked it.”

“Yeah, I know she did,” Yukari replied with a sigh. “She probably has more pent up energy you should probably go take care of.”

But he didn’t leave. “Are you nervous at all?”

He saw her shrug her shoulders. “Maybe, a little. But it’s not like I’m doing this alone or with people I only met once.” She pushed herself off the door. “I know we haven’t worked together in ages, but whenever there was a crisis, we all had each other’s back. So maybe I’m not nervous as much as I am…curious to know how tomorrow plays out.”

“You’re taking a great risk for me, Yukari.” His head dropped to his chest. “I wish I knew how to thank you.”

She slapped his shoulder playfully. “Tell your wife to keep herself contained. The last thing I want her to do is call me up and tell me she’s *pregnant.”*

Akihiko choked on his breath. “P-Pregnant?”

“I’ll be fine, Akihiko.” She laughed at his darkening face, then turned to open the door. “I’m just glad I can help.”

It took him half a second to calm himself down enough to even form words to say to her again. “I won’t let anything happen to you. Or anyone else.”

She placed a hand on his chest and patted him with a smile on her face. “Yeah, I know you won’t. Keep yourself safe, too, okay?”

He was grateful he had plenty of sleep the last two days. No matter how hard he tried to close his eyes and shut off his mind that night, he couldn't. He understood perfectly what Yukari meant about being *curious* . A million little things could go wrong, or everything could go right. He assumed his boss was already biting the bait for now, since Junpei would be meeting with him, but whether that was a set-up all its own, he didn't know. Fuuka was the only one who would be able to keep them all in touch, and he was relieved to have her working with them, but if something went wrong in a split second, they'd be screwed.

Positive thoughts.

But when had life ever been positive for *this* long?

Minako slept through the night, her energy hitting a wall after their late dinner. It was a blessing, he thought, because after Yukari's little *remark* about being *pregnant* , he was very much *not* wanting to do anything more than sleep next to her. Or try. Her breathing helped him to some degree, but he couldn't focus on them long enough to relax. It was dark in the room. He couldn't look at her like he wanted to. His main source of comfort came in *feeling* her next to him, a physical reminder that he wasn't alone, he never would be, and everything was going to be okay.

He was able to close his eyes for maybe an hour or two, but he purposely kept them closed when he felt Minako trying to sneak out of bed a little before he had to be up for work. He figured she was going to try and surprise him with something, breakfast hopefully, knowing that she had mentioned at one point or another that she would like to bring him breakfast in bed *once* .

The alarm went off on the nightstand and he figured he needed to get up and moving. As soon as he sat up in the bed, Minako popped her head into the room and smiled at him. "Ah, good morning!"

Akihiko stretched out his back like he had a third day of great sleep. "You're up before me?"

Minako was often very good about reading him, either by his tone of his body language, but she either ignored it all or didn't notice. "I

have a protein packed breakfast for you this morning!”

Hearing that, his stomach growled, but he wasn’t really super hungry. But she pushed her way inside, carrying a small tray of all sorts of food, then sat herself on the bed across from him. There were two of every little container, half of them not nearly as full as the others, likely for her. He shouldn’t have been surprised that Minako would have gone to great lengths to feed him, because she usually did, but he chuckled regardless.

“You did all of this for me?”

She reached for her cup of sugar-filled coffee. “It’s not hard, honey. You just make it hard.”

It was odd to be eating breakfast on their bed, but the smile never left her face, and he sure as hell wasn’t about to lose it over proper etiquette. He also didn’t know if everything tasted so much better because he wasn’t so *down* , even if he was a little tired. While the vacation worked wonders on his mentality, her homemade meals would always beat out a restaurant.

“Thank you, Minako.” He finished off the last of his coffee, then pushed himself off the bed. “Better hope I have to chase after a pick pocketer today or I’m going to chase someone anyway.”

She laughed at him, but made no move to clear the now empty dishes. In fact, she moved to sit on her legs, looking up at him with a smile so mischievous it made him burn. It took him a second or two, but then he knew what she was doing.

“Please. Don’t mind me,” she added to further embarrass him. Well, if he could walk around a beach with her in a speedo, he could *dress* in front of her. It’s not like he never felt her eyes on him when she pretended to be asleep anyway. He figured he could do his best to annoy her by taking his time, but breakfast had already taken up quite a chunk of it. But he made the last few minutes count. For her.

She saw him out the door with a kiss that *almost* had him using another personal day, but then he remembered *why* he was going to work and managed to break away from her. “I love you, Minako.”

Her arms held him tightly, but she eventually released him. Her smile was still beautiful, just a bit more sad. “I love you, too, Aki.”

He gave her one last kiss before he closed the door and headed out to work. The entire commute, he clutched his phone like a lifeline. He always had it on vibrate, even while at work, and he was suddenly grateful for that. The less attention he drew to himself, the better. Him being attached to his phone all day would create suspicion among the wrong people, he was sure. And he hated being buzzed on the little watch device. It always freaked him out.

A few of his coworkers came up to chat with him, commenting on how he looked a bit darker and had a red patch on his nose from sunburn. He had no idea how to respond to them, since he knew his bosses were listening in on him, but he didn’t have to think about it too long.

“I’m glad you had a wonderful trip, Sanada.”

Mitsuru said something about this. His boss might try and intimidate him. But Akihiko didn’t think he would be brazen enough to try in front of the rest of his team. “Oh, well thank you. I would have bought you a souvenir if I knew you were going to miss me so much.”

The other man narrowed his eyes, but the smile spread over his lips. “That’s a pity. We could have had a gift exchange.”

It was hard to play dumb when he knew *exactly* what he was saying. So he waved his hand to deflect any suspicion and grabbed at a file outside of his door. “Didn’t know you took vacations. Maybe next time.”

His boss walked past him without another word, but his grin came off more menacing with every step. One of his coworkers even commented on it. “Are you getting fired or something?”

“Oh, hell no!” Another shouted from behind him. “They know damn well how many people would riot if you were fired, Sanada!”

It was nice to know.

His shift was surprisingly boring. There wasn't a lot of paperwork to work on, since Medjed had been more of a confusion than a case. Some people had been arrested that had dealings in Kaneshiro's business, but not the one he was looking for. Small time punks, some of them barely out of high school or dropouts. He spent most of his day shooting the breeze with coworkers, which was different in its own way, but oddly refreshing. He tried to speak to those he could on a frequent basis, but it was nice to just *talk* about everything and nothing at the same time.

Until he felt his phone go off in his pocket.

It was time to put the team to the test.

Chapter 90

Chapter 90

Ren had been looking forward to their trip to Hawaii for days.

It was going to be nice to get away. Get away from school, the unending rumors, the overwhelming demand for the Phantom Thieves to do something huge.

But of course, Sanada just *had* to strike the fear of god in him and now he was terrified.

Thankfully, he had a long and boring plane ride to sit through. It was pretty easy to bury his mind in his book while trying to tune out Ryuji's annoying snores and occasional head on his shoulder. How Ryuji was able to fall asleep so easily, he would never know. He was slightly jealous, because if he *did* close his eyes and sleep, he would be that much closer to the moment of a lifetime.

Ren had never been out of the country, but he liked to wander around his hometown. He loved the sea. He loved the beaches. He loved seeing people happy and carefree, even if it was all fake and temporary. Regardless, it was nice, and he needed a nice break from the norm. Just for a few days.

He tried not to think so selfishly, but he really wanted to see Makoto in a bathing suit this time around. When he had realized she had been asked to go on the trip, that was all he thought about. And how sad he had been the first time they went to the beach together and it didn't happen.

But, he wanted to keep his head, so he had to keep his gushing contained. If Makoto was even the *slightest* bit put off by him, she could tell her dad and then he would be a dead kid.

Between his book, fighting off Ryuji, and managing to close his eyes for a few minutes at a time, the hours passed and they landed safely. Ren knew very little about jet lag, and he assumed he would

be too excited to care, but it was mid-afternoon and all he wanted to do was *sleep* . He could sleep on the beach, with the sound of the waves behind him, with a pretty girl in the seat next to him…

He was one of the first ones to clear customs, and instead of waiting for Ann and Ryuji, he slowly walked up to where he saw Makoto standing. She held a notebook in her hand and was talking to a few students who didn't really seem to be interested in listening. Upon seeing him approach, the students scattered, but Makoto sighed and dropped her head.

"This is going to be impossible."

Ren offered her a smile. "Maybe you should relax." He added a light laugh. "We're on vacation."

Makoto gave him a disapproving stare. She looked tired, too. "No. I have work to do. And so far, all the students want to do is *not* listen to me."

"So you're telling me," he said as he leaned his shoulder against the wall. "That you only came with us to *babysit?"*

She was quiet, but something poked his heart when he realized she was nervous. She didn't blush at his closeness, but she sure as hell put some more distance between them. "I…I have a job to do."

As he watched Makoto quickly nod her head at him before she walked away, he began to worry that maybe he had overstepped his bounds *already* . But, she hadn't been nervous or uncomfortable around him in weeks. He thought they were over that. Unless, she realized that she *did* like him and now she was worried he wouldn't feel the same.

He had no idea how that would be possible, given how *obvious* he had been with her…

Maybe she needed to hear a direct statement.

…And now *he* was nervous.

Luckily, he wasn't given too much time to stand in a self-made panic

about how he had the right atmosphere to come clean to Makoto about his feelings. Ryuji ran up behind him, threw an arm over his shoulder, and all but shouted in his ears.

“Hawaii dude! We’re in effin’ *Hawaii!”*

He heard Ann’s dramatic sigh before he saw her. “Yeah, we all know!”

The shuttle from the airport to the hotel helped to rejuvenate his spirit. He was still a little tired, but catching sight of the sun’s rays bouncing off the ocean made him desperate to run along the beach. Ren hadn’t spent too much time investigating places to go sight-seeing in Hawaii, since all he really wanted to do was sit next to Makoto on the beach and do nothing. Tokyo had its own fair share of places to adventure to. While he would likely never return to the States, the beaches were good enough “adventuring” for him.

They all gathered in the lobby. Ryuji was wide-eyed and literally shaking with excitement. Ann looked tired, but very much excited and soaking up the view with a few other students. Ren, however, chose to repeat his earlier actions and approach Makoto as she flipped through her notebook.

“Please tell me you’re not studying.”

She looked really tired, but lacking a lot of that spark that he had seen in Ryuji and Ann. It made him sad. Did she really only come along to work, because that was her *duty?* Because that was *expected* of her? Would Kawakami or whoever else was in charge let her have *one* day to act like a normal teenager on vacation?

“I’m trying to settle everyone down enough so I can tell them their room assignments.”

Ren mentally told himself not to say it, but he did anyway. “Am I rooming with you?”

Makoto *almost* dropped her book. He grinned. “Um…n-no.” Her fingers were shaking slightly as she tried to find his assignment. “I… um, I actually can’t find yours.”

He tested the waters again. “Well, I can sleep on the floor. In your room. I don’t snore. Morgana would if he was here.”

He had a feeling he may have taken things too far when she frowned in disgust. “You’re not rooming with me. So stop it.”

“Sorry.”

There was an uncomfortable silence that fell around them. Makoto tried to busy herself with her paperwork and Ren just wanted to say something to tell her he wasn’t trying to be a creep and he wouldn’t *do* anything with her and he was joking…

“Ren! Oh my god, there are so many *hot* chicks here!”

Not the conversation he wanted to get pulled into. Ryuji slapped him on the shoulder and tugged on his arm so he could *show* him the girls he had apparently found *hot* . “I’m totally gonna find the love of my life here!”

Ren shook himself out of his grasp. “Good luck with that.”

His friend pouted in return. “What? You ain’t gonna go babe hunting with me?” Then, something clicked in Ryuji’s eyes and he gasped loudly. “Oh… *shit!* You gotta girlfriend already?!”

And of course Ann would choose that exact moment to come into the conversation. “I hear you have a *girlfriend* already?”

Gods he hoped he wasn’t blushing. And that he sounded strong and confident. And that Makoto wasn’t holding her breath and hoping he said *yes* and grabbed her hand and…

“We need to discuss your room assignments.”

He was grateful Makoto broke the silence, but he could tell by her tone that she did it on purpose. She stood next to him, unfazed, and he wondered if she picked up on Ann’s underlying message or if it had gone over her head.

After what felt like *hours* , Makoto had finally reached out to all the students and gave them the list of rules, curfew hours, and room

numbers. Ryuji was pretty upset that he didn't get Ren as a roommate, but Makoto still had yet to give *him* a number. He felt like he was annoying, but he followed behind her as she walked up to Kawakami and another teacher he couldn't name.

"Um, Amamiya doesn't have a room assigned to him."

Their sensei sighed, like normal, and waved her hand. "I hate to leave the decision up to you, but there's a few other things I need to work out." She sighed again as Ren's heart skipped a beat. "The principal probably didn't expect him to be allowed to come."

Makoto opened her mouth to protest, but Kawakami walked off before she could be heard. Sensing her discomfort, Ren placed his hands in his pockets. "It's okay. Really. I can sleep on the floor in someone's room. Can't be any less pleasant than my bed back in Tokyo."

She ignored him and flipped through her notebook again. He stood in silence, waiting for her to find a room that maybe had an opening, but when she reached the end without a word, he swallowed hard.

"I'll see if they have any more rooms available."

Ren didn't follow her as she headed back towards the front desk. Makoto wasn't too far away, but far enough away that he couldn't hear the conversation. What would happen if they were fully booked? Would he have to sleep in the lobby? He was sure he could sneak into Ryuji's room and sleep on the floor in there, so he could at least get *some* sleep. He sure as hell wasn't about to get Makoto in trouble by choosing to walk around and explore at night and sleep on the beach during the day…

He held his breath when she approached him. She was quiet, almost causing him to suffocate, but then she released her breath and gripped her notebook like a lifeline. "They're unfortunately booked until the day before we leave."

He tried to cheer her up with a smile. "It's okay. I mean, had Sojiro not liked me, I probably wouldn't have been allowed to come." He stretched out his back just to give him some time to think. "I'll sleep

in the lobby. If that's okay? Or if you don't tell, I'll sneak into Ryuji's room when everyone's asleep and I can sleep on the floor in his room."

"You won't sleep on the floor, Ren."

He let out a calm, steady breath before laughing. "It's either that or I'm-,"

"You can stay in my room."

His first reaction was to laugh. But try as he might, his words got stuck in the back of his throat. He felt his heart pound against his ribs loudly enough the sound could wake the dead. "W-What?"

"This is my fault." She grabbed her arm, a move Ren had seen before when she was troubled and thinking and *scared* . "I didn't think I was going to be here, so I didn't actually look at the roster until…the plane ride."

"I don't want you to be uncomfortable because you feel like this is somehow your fault."

He was proud of her for sounding strong when he knew she was worried. But her next words took the breath right out of him. "Just… don't tell my dad."

It took him half a second to register what she said, but then he threw his head back and laughed. "Oh, trust me, I would never. I'm pretty sure he wanted to kill me when he dropped you off."

"He was actually the one who supported my decision to come."

He coughed on his laugh. "Oh?"

Makoto lowered her head and pressed the notebook to her chest. "This trip is supposed to be enjoyable for you. W-Within limits…o-of course!"

He took a step closer to her. "And you?"

It got her to look up at him. "Huh?"

“And it’s not supposed to be enjoyable for you?”

She turned her head with a soft laugh. “I’m here to work, Ren, not to vacation.”

“You wouldn’t be allowed to spare even a few hours to hang out?” He almost added in *with all of us* so she didn’t go back to labeling him as a creep, but he was curious to know if she was thinking that or if she was thinking he only meant *him* .

“It’s my duty as student council president to-,”

“Stop that, Makoto.” She had such a sad look in her eyes. He wanted to hug her. “Maybe instead of trying to please everyone, you should do what makes you happy. And while I would never ask you to relinquish your role, but I’m sure *one* day, you can get out and walk around and experience being a normal teenager.”

Her head fell to her chest again, but he waited for her to speak back up. He didn’t want to pressure her into hanging out, but heaven forbid the girl relax and have fun for once in her life. She sure as hell deserved a break, too.

“One day.”

He went from being anxious and upset to happy as can be in a split second. “I hope you let me know which day you pick.”

Makoto only nodded her head, and as much as he wanted to, he didn’t throw his arm over her shoulder. It was hard, but he contained himself. “So, did you get a nice room?”

And there was a blush on her face that made his heart explode. “Um, I-I don’t know…”

Since he couldn’t drape an arm on her shoulders, he nudged her with one of his own. “Lead us to our quarters, my Queen.”

She said nothing in return, probably couldn’t, because she was hugging that notebook far too tightly and she was bright red in the face.

However, before Makoto could unlock their door, she surprised him with a violent shake of her head and literally threw the key card at him. “I-I forgot something!”

He managed to grab her before she could take two steps. “Stop. Look, I know you don’t want to do this, so don’t.”

She shook her head again. “N-No. I-I…I really did, um…forget something.”

“Makoto.” He waited for her to look at him before he continued. “Making you uncomfortable would make me miserable and hate this trip. So please,” he said as he handed her the card. “I’ll work out something, okay?”

But, before *he* could walk away, she grabbed his wrist. He turned to her, but her eyes dropped from his the next second. “No…I…I’m sorry. I-I’ll be…okay.”

He placed each of his hands on her shoulders. “Let me say this, if it helps. I promise I won’t bother you. I’m a pretty peaceful sleeper. I’ll stay in my own bed and I *promise* I won’t annoy you.”

“A-And you won’t…t-try and sleep…with me?”

Of all things she could have said, that was the *last* thing he expected to hear her say. He was so surprised by it that he tipped over and hit the wall. “Uh…n-no?”

It was *far* from convincing, but a million thoughts ran through his head. Did…Did she *want* to sleep with him? Was she only referring to sleeping in the same bed together or…something different? Did he just offend her by saying no? Would he be able to push her away if by chance she actually *wanted* to?

That blush on her face that he loved so deeply suddenly had him very nervous. “I-I’m sorry…I don’t mean to…be weird…”

He pushed the keycard into its slot, turned the handle, then looked back to Makoto. “Let’s talk, okay?”

She thankfully followed him into the room (which was nice and had a

view of the ocean!), but she looked so miserable. To help calm her down, he grabbed her forearms and lowered his head to be in her sights.

“Makoto, it’s not weird to be worried. I mean, I’m a boy and you’re a girl. And while I joke around with you, I don’t want you to be uncomfortable.”

She frowned. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

He said something wrong. He could tell. She had a sharp tone and she walked around him like they weren’t having an awkward conversation because she was too nice for her own good. “I don’t mean to offend you.”

Oh god. Did that mean she was testing him, and now he ruined his chance? It was too soon. They weren’t even *dating* yet. Was she just rebellious since she was out from under her parents for maybe the first time?

“Maybe you should stop joking around and take me seriously.” She dropped onto the edge of a bed, closest to the door, but Ren’s heart stopped in his chest. “My mother told me to be careful. Because even the smartest people can act foolishly in the moment.” Her red eyes bore deeply into his. It scared him. “If you promise to stay in your bed, then I will allow this arrangement. The first time you break your word, I’ll make sure to document it on your record.”

A part of him thought it was super hot that she was threatening him with the *look* while still being super cute, but he had upset her, probably made her think his flirting had been one big front, and now it set him back a few paces. He thought about coming clean to her, especially since she kind of came clean to him about a sensitive topic, but…maybe later.

“I promise.”

She was on her feet the next second. “Good. Now, you have the rest of the day to do as you please. I have work to do.”

The only reason Ren let her walk out of the door was because he

couldn't think of anything to say when she passed him. Plus, they could talk that night. The thought made him smile again.

Sadly, he lost most of his energy when he plopped into a chair on the beach after meeting up with Ryuji, Ann, Yusuke, and Mishima. Yusuke took a seat next to him, but Ren literally could have fallen asleep, so he had no idea what the artist was doing or thinking. Ryuji and Mishima he could hear talking about a babe battle, to which Ann chimed in and probably beat both of them over the head. The day was far from exciting, but it was exactly what he needed.

Friends. A beach. And peace.

That all changed when he waited in the lobby for his friends to head up to their room before slowly making his way to his own. It was odd for him to be nervous about being with Makoto, but he was. He *had* to tell her he liked her, wanted to be something more than friends or being *fake* boyfriend/girlfriend, but he oddly wasn't ready to confess. Not yet. He still had some reservations. And this was a vacation. And Makoto wasn't all too happy with him since she assumed he had been *joking* this entire time…

She was in the room when he closed the door, facing away from him, presumably reading or writing in her notebook. He almost made the mistake of sitting next to her, but he quickly reminded himself that would get him in *more* trouble, so he sat across from her on his bed.

There was nothing in her hands when he looked. It made his heart hurt. "You okay?"

She was still for a few seconds, then, "I'm sorry."

He chuckled to help clear the air. "Why are you sorry?"

Her hands twisted together on her lap. "I was very cold to you earlier. After everything you've done for me and my family, I shouldn't have been."

I really like you, Makoto. "No, it's okay." He added another laugh for good measure. "I'm glad you felt confident enough to talk to me

about it.”

“Would you?”

He cocked his head to the side, confused as to what she was asking. “Would I what?”

She stopped shuffling her hands and lifted her head to face him for the first time since he entered the room. “Would you sleep with me?”

Fuck .

He could have thrown up. “W-What?”

She dropped her head again and her hands clasped together. He was still reeling and couldn’t think straight to reach out for her hands. “I ask because…well, I-I don’t mean to disgust you or anything, but my mom told me this happened to her and my dad. Both had level heads. And they were in a situation that was new to them and things…happened.”

Not only did Makoto just verify that by “sleeping together,” she meant *sleeping together* , but she also sent him into another tailspin. Because if she seriously had a nightmare or something, or snuggled up next to him in bed…what *would* he have done?

What would *she* have done?

“Can I be honest with you?”

Gods he didn’t think his heart was ready for this. “Um. Y-Yeah?”

“I can trust you, Ren.” Okay. That he could handle. “But I don’t think it’s because I don’t think you’re the type. I just feel like you think I’m an idiot, but one who will murder you if you touch me.”

That he hadn’t been ready for. “You honestly believe I think of you as an idiot?”

Her chin remained planted in her chest. “Yes.”

His heart fell into his stomach. “Is this because I said I was *joking* earlier?”

Silence.

Ren almost punched himself in the face. “I said it, yes, but I didn’t mean it. I was…maybe, uncomfortable when you brought up the subject. But what I was hoping you would realize is that I don’t poke fun at you because I think you’re an *idiot* .” He had to take a breath. She still wouldn’t look at him. “I do it because you have the cutest expressions and I very much enjoy seeing them.”

She balled her hands up at her side. “Stop it.”

He was left with no other choice at this point. “Makoto, I…I’m being serious when I say this, because…because I do like you. A lot. You’re cute. And smart. And yes you could murder me. And seeing you happy rather than suffering makes me, I don’t know…happy? And the reason I was surprised when you brought up…sleeping together, was because yeah, I do like you, but I would never want to do anything unless I *knew* you wanted it, too.”

The silence slowly started to suffocate him. It was a terrible confession. He could have done so much better. And now he wouldn’t get that chance again. Unless it went way over her head, *again* , but he would need time to recover. Because she *had* to understand at this point.

“Y-You…”

Ren swallowed and held his breath. Maybe she was stunned and needed another *hour* to recover? He would die in the meantime, he was sure of that.

“Y-You… *like* m-me?”

He tried to kill off the nervousness from the air. “Oh, no, I like you *a lot* , Makoto.” He pushed those limits again. “I’ve been trying to drop hints for a while now, but they either go over your head or you thought that I acted like that with everyone.”

He saw her shoulders tense, so he assumed that was what she

thought. He just wanted to sit next to her on the bed without her freaking out and thinking he wanted to jump right into the supposed *perks* of a relationship. “I only act like this around you. This is what you do to me.”

She threw her hands to her face and some of that tension was lifted off his chest. “S-Stop…”

“I’ll seriously stop if I’m being too much for you.”

It wasn’t a *will you be my girlfriend* kind of statement, and he knew he would have to ask if she responded accordingly to his current one.

“M-Maybe…um…t-tone it down…”

It was hard to hear her with her hands muffling her words, but he heard them all the same. It brought a huge smile to his face. He could have flown out the window with how light he felt. “I’ll try and keep things normal in public. I’ll have to work on that when it’s just me and you.”

Makoto groaned into her hands and Ren had to throw himself back down on his bed before he sat beside her. “Go to sleep.”

“I’ll sleep better if I get a goodnight hug.”

Ren bit his tongue, the room growing stiff and silent once again. He really needed to learn not to push his luck. It always seemed to backfire in his face.

“O-Okay…”

He was on his feet faster than he could blink, trying to contain his excitement and nerves and desire to grab her off the bed and hold her on his own. She sure took her sweet time following after him, but he could see the pink dusting her cheeks and that nervous tension in her shoulders and it *elated* him.

Makoto was the one to lift her arms first, but Ren was the one who pulled her into him. He had to tell himself not to squeeze her to death. It was a cliché thought, but he enjoyed the way she fit into

him like a missing puzzle piece. He also noticed that she was relaxed against him, her head resting against his chest, her arms loosely holding on to him. If he focused hard enough, which he couldn't, he could have sworn she was smiling.

It was the hardest thing letting her pull away from him, but he realized that she had, in fact, been smiling, and it was worth it. Then, out of nowhere, she pushed against his chest and he fell back onto the bed. Before he could wrap his head around why she had shoved him, he caught the smirk that came to her face as she turned to pull out her sheets.

"Go to sleep, Ren."

Now he had to pray his dreams didn't run away with him.

Chapter 91

Chapter 91

Akihiko was a mix between nervous and excited.

If everything went well, he would be one step closer to knowing what the hell was happening. If a few things went wrong or off, he could work around it. If things blew up in his face, well, he'd be fucked.

No one seemed to mind that he walked back into his office to read the message. He told himself not to shut the door, not to start to panic, but it was about that time for him to call it a day anyway. If he had to avoid questions, he could tell everyone he was just in a post-vacation slump and he would be fine in the morning.

It was a message from a number he didn't recognize. *How about I give you a gift anyway, Sanada?*

Knowing this was the start of the night, Akihiko took a deep breath, then grabbed his jacket off the back of his chair. Fuuka would tell him where his boss was when he was on the train, to avoid any curious stares from those who were likely watching him closely right now. At the moment, he had no idea his boss was referring to his *wife* , nor did he know it *was* his boss, so he typed out a simple reply.

Oh? I don't know who to expect it from…

The response was quick. *You've messed with the wrong people for too long.*

Kishita?

He knew it wasn't his other boss that wanted his head, right now anyway, since he heard his voice only a second or two ago. *Meet me at the address provided so you can introduce me to your wife. - Masami*

Now Akihiko had to feign panic. He threw his jacket on, hoping someone would comment on why he was doing as much when it was hot and humid outside. He took a breath before he bolted out of his office, saying something along the lines of, “gotta go” to anyone who called out to him. If someone was going to report back to Masami, he could only hope they told him his threat *worked* .

He kept the charade going in public, just in case. Once he made it to the station, Fuuka sent him detailed directions on how to get to the location. She also informed him that Junpei was on the phone with Masami, providing him with the *long* way to said location. Mitsuru was waiting in the small warehouse with Yukari, and so far, everything was going to plan.

They purposely made the location close to Kasumigaseki in case Akihiko had any sort of delay. He had never been to the spot they had chosen, which was good in its own way, since it made him look like a lost child looking for his mother. With navigation help from Fuuka (he may have been a little lost), he managed to find the deserted building he needed to be at. He entered quietly, so if Junpei was still on the phone, the creaking door wouldn’t create a need for alarm through the line.

It was dark inside when he opened the door. It confused him, since he thought they would have picked a place that had some kind of light or how would Masami know his “wife” was-

“Sanada!”

Ten years of his life just went out the window. He turned to find Junpei bent over, slapping at his knees, and laughing hysterically. “Dude, I hope that’s on the camera! Mina-tan would *love* that!”

“She might like this, too.” And he punched him, right in the gut, silencing the laughter once and for all. “Asshole.”

“Let’s be serious, children.” He was bitter with Mitsuru for allowing Junpei to scare the shit out of him, then not let him beat the Christ out of him. Especially when there was a small smile on her face. “He wanted to make sure you were awake and ready.”

He almost punched Junpei a second time. “Yeah, and he’s lucky he’s not dead.”

“Guys, I’m *tired* of waiting. Where is he?”

That was when he noticed Yukari, sitting on a chair in the middle of the room, her hands tied behind her back. She sure as hell didn’t look scared, but more *bored* . It was a good thing, since it seemed she wasn’t *scared* . But hopefully when that time came, she could fake it well enough to work in their favor.

Mitsuru lifted a hand in the air and her other one went to her ear. “Alright everyone, he’s getting closer. We should assume position and be prepared. Junpei, meet him outside. Do not let him in until he shows you the money.” She turned her eyes to him. “You stay out of sight.”

Mitsuru then pointed to a corner of the building with a few wooden crates in the shadows. He tried not to sound disappointed. “This is pretty cliché, don’t you think?”

She chose not to respond to him and walked to stand behind Yukari. “You know what to do from here.” She lifted the cloth dangling around Yukari’s neck to cover her mouth. “If you ever start to worry, let Junpei know. We will put an end to it.”

Akihiko suddenly felt like a horrible human being. “I’m sorry, Yukari.”

Had she had the ability to say something snarky to him, she would have. He could tell as much from her facial reaction. Mitsuru nodded to him, so he gave one last look to Junpei, who in turn gave him a thumbs up.

The plan had seemed so simple at first glance. He trusted his friends. They trusted him. He’d been a part of an undercover assignment before, but it was oftentimes hard to predict what the criminal would do. He had to be ready for anything, but yet, he had to be patient. Thankfully, he prided himself on reading people’s body language, so he could only hope he was ready for what was going to happen.

The corner Akihiko and Mitsuru were hiding in was close enough to the entrance that he could hear the car come to a stop and the car door shut. Good news, he only heard *one* door shut. Better news, he recognized his boss's voice the minute he spoke.

"Where's the wife?"

Junpei chuckled. Akihiko wouldn't have known that was him if he didn't know he was there. "And my money?"

How often did Mitsuru ask these guys for help? There was no way Junpei could be this calm and surprisingly *good* at it if this was his first attempt. "You will give me the girl first."

Akihiko couldn't *see* anything, but he could picture his boss holding a gun to Junpei's head and trying to intimidate him that way. Was there a signal or something Junpei could give that would clue them in on any serious danger? He wouldn't know any other way there was trouble…

"Well, I guess if you don't show me the money, I can't remember where I put her." He chuckled again. "Scavenger hunts are kinda my thing. I do like keeping people guessing. Now. The money."

The silence unnerved him. He was half tempted to smash his fist through the wall to see what was happening, but he knew if he did that, their cover was blown. Mitsuru, sensing his restlessness, grabbed him firmly over his wrist.

"Junpei knows what he's doing. Trust him."

He sighed as quietly as he could. "How do you know he's not in trouble right now?"

"We would know."

Well, *he* would like to know, too. However, Mitsuru had been planning this scheme for days on end, and she was *not* one to overlook even the finest of details. He knew she would tell him, or he would know by a reaction of some sort, if something *bad* was happening.

“Here.”

Junpei’s squeal would have annoyed the hell out of him, but in this case, it meant the money had been shown. At least, why else would he be so excited? They sure as hell weren’t talking over babes and baseball.

“Where’s the wife?”

“Ah, fair enough, fair enough. But a quick rule here, she’s *my* property until you *pay* for it. So you give me the money, I give you the girl.”

The door to the building slid open loudly. Akihiko lowered himself to his knees, even though he was well hidden enough standing up. He didn’t dare peek around the corner in case he was caught, but, as Mitsuru was thoughtful with *everything* , there was a rounded mirror hung by the door. It was the perfect position, angled so he could see *them* , but they couldn’t see *him* .

He needed to give Mitsuru more credit.

“Well, well, it’s finally time I meet Mrs. Sanada.”

The money wasn’t in Junpei’s hands, so Akihiko knew he didn’t have enough evidence to pounce yet. But his boss kept taking steps until he was within striking distance of Yukari. Junpei, thankfully, came to stand between the two of them, as if anticipating an aggressive act.

“Dude, the fuck did I tell you out there? She’s *my* property. Now, hand over the money and I’ll hand over the girl and *then* you can beat the shit out of her.”

For good measure, Yukari fought her restraints, and it amused his boss. But instead of handing Junpei the money, he folded his arms over his chest. “You’re a pretty thing, you know that?” Then, he laughed. “You both sure made some pretty daughters.”

Mitsuru had to grab him by his collar to keep him from doing something stupid. “Calm down. This is good news. It means he’s taking the bait.”

Right. And if everything kept going well, this man would never come close to either Sae or Makoto again. He nodded his head in response, letting her know he understood, and then she released him.

Yukari glared at his boss, but her angry remark was silenced by the gag around her mouth. Junpei patted her head, a little harder than necessary, and smiled. “Yeah, she’s feisty, that’s for sure. Bitch bit me more than once trying to subdue her. So be ready for that.”

His boss chuckled darkly. “I see Sanada likes it rough, huh?”

Gross.

“Well, I do have little ones to feed, so if we could wrap this up, that’d be great.”

Akihiko couldn’t see Masami’s face, but the grin that appeared on Junpei’s made his heart race with anticipation. He lifted the briefcase with the supposed money, shoved it into Junpei’s chest, then turned his head back to where Yukari was still struggling to break free.

“Now, now, no need to be so volatile. You’ll be seeing your dear husband here soon.”

Mitsuru gave him the approval, then Akihiko carefully maneuvered his way around the crates. Before he could sneak up behind him, however, his boss lifted his hand and smacked Yukari across the face. Junpei stood by and shrugged his shoulders, not at all fazed, but Akihiko didn’t let it happen again.

“I hear you were looking for me.”

Akihiko managed to get him in a headlock the next second. Masami was more of an administrative cop, so he was rather easy to restrain. His boss struggled for several minutes, but Akihiko never once loosened his hold. Eventually, Masami cursed and ended his fight when Mitsuru came out of the shadows with a grin on her face.

“Well done, team. Get him back to the station in one piece, please, Akihiko.”

Masami tried to kick at him, headbutt him, anything he could, but Akihiko quickly put an end to that when he twisted his arms behind his back, handcuffed him, and pushed his chest into a wall. “Kidnapping is a felony, you know. We have a lot to talk about.”

Akihiko shoved his boss into the back seat of Mitsuru’s car while Junpei worked on freeing Yukari from her bindings. She seemed well enough, but he approached her regardless. “That didn’t hurt, did it?”

Yukari waved him off. “Pretty terrible cop if that’s the worst he can do.”

“Be glad he didn’t pull a weapon, then.”

Mitsuru cleared her throat to get their attention again. “I’m glad you’re safe, Yukari, but this mission is far from over.” She locked eyes with him next. “We have some information to obtain.”

Akihiko nodded, ready to prove *his* worth to the team. It would also be wonderful to finally get some kind of direction as to where this giant mess was leading them. He didn’t want to get his hopes up, but he *really* hoped Shido was involved somehow. He could worry about piecing the rest of the details together later.

Mitsuru, for once, did not have a driver, so she took the seat in front while Akihiko slid in next to Masami. His boss narrowed his eyes at him, not surprisingly, but Mitsuru didn’t start the car. Several minutes went by in silence. Akihiko kept his eyes on Masami, enjoying the fact the man was starting to realize what was happening and that they weren’t *moving* and going to *his* safe haven.

“Akihiko, I would advise you to stop stalling.”

He chuckled. “But it’s fun.”

“And I have things to get back to.”

“Right,” he said as he turned to face Masami fully. His boss’s eyes darted back and forth between him and Mitsuru, but then Akihiko pounded the seatback between the two of them. “You’re in a lot of shit, Masami. You’re not going anywhere until you tell us what we

need to know."

Akihiko knew it wouldn't be that easy. "You think detaining me in this nice Kirijo car is going to make me tell you why I was after your wife?"

"Spare us the bullshit." Akihiko glared back at him. "And if you were half as smart as you think you were, you would have known that wasn't my wife."

Mitsuru chimed in with, "That's good news for you, Akihiko. Some people do not have the same resources at their fingertips." She added a chuckle. "You've been spoiled."

"This is an unlawful interrogation. You know that, right?"

Akihiko bit back a laugh. "So *now* you care about being lawful…"

Mitsuru turned to face both of them. "You would rather be here, in this car, than paraded through the police station, where we are sure your companions are waiting to hear how you blindly walked into a trap and now their money is missing."

"What do you think they would do to him?" he asked, like he didn't *know* and found it interesting. "I know for sure Kishita will throw a fit. His loud and rambunctious shouting will likely draw in more people who would love to go public with a police officer who *kidnaps* …"

"What the hell do you want, Sanada?" Masami chuckled as he shook his head. "You act like I don't have friends who will bail me out of this and go after you-,"

"Again? Jesus." Akihiko crossed his arms and leaned back against the door. "Whoever you report to was dumb as fuck putting *you* in charge of that hit. I'm sure he would *love* to know how attempt number…hell, what number are we on now?"

"I do believe this is plot number four."

"Four!" He wiped at his eyes in frustration. "You and your friends have tried to kill me *four* times, and now you want to go after my family, too? And you can't even get *that* right."

Mitsuru pulled out a file and lifted a sheet of paper in the air. “I do believe I am wasting my time showing you this document, but perhaps you will learn something of value.” She handed it to Akihiko, who promptly dropped it in the space in front of Masami. “This is how we were able to discover it was you who put out the hit on Akihiko and his family. Computers are dangerous machines if you don’t know how to use one. I will give you credit for trying, or shall I have my employees hold a class to better educate who taught *you* how to set this all up?”

There was a look of defeated agony on Masami’s face, but Akihiko kept going. “You hired a hit-man with a fake background, believed him when he gave you a report on my supposed wife, then brought five hundred million to the scene and expected to *walk away?”* He tilted his head back with a smirk. “You’re one of the dumbest criminals I’ve ever met. And I deal with teenagers.”

Masami groaned loudly. “What are you after?”

Mitsuru held up a hand. “Please note that if you do not give us what we need, then the press shall be notified in the morning of a renowned police administrator with ties to the yakuza and criminal organizations overseas.”

“Bet they’d be pissed their money is gone.”

Mitsuru hummed in reply. “You see how this is looking for you, yes?”

“This is a threat on my life!” Masami screamed. “You ought to be arrested for this!”

Both Akihiko and Mitsuru smiled. “Yeah, I guess we are harassing you. Heaven forbid we care about that.”

“Now, now, Akihiko. We can play fair.” Masami went still as Akihiko and Mitsuru refocused their attention on him. “However, know that if you help us, no one will know anything about this day, your past, and we will allow you to walk free.”

Something flashed over Masami’s face, a mix between awe and confusion. It was exactly what Akihiko needed to see. “How do I

trust you?"

"I would like to think I've hated you since we first met," Akihiko started. "But when was the last time I tried to kill *your* family or arrest *you* over falsified crimes?"

Mitsuru continued for him. "You do have a choice to make, and we would rather you make it quickly. It is on you whether or not to trust us, but be warned of the consequences."

Another look replaced the surprise. He was terrified now. Good. "You have no idea what you're asking of me."

Akihiko spared a glance to Mitsuru, then shrugged his shoulders. "Well, we tried. I'll set up a meeting with that reporter tonight and I'm sure she'll-,"

"No, stop…"

"Then tell us who all you're involved with."

Akihiko desperately wanted to ask him if Shido was in any way a part of all of this, but he didn't want to put words in his mouth. Plus, he could pass the blame on anyone with a simple nod of the head. *Patience* .

"You wouldn't want to know if you knew who they were."

The slight tremor in Masami's voice did wonders for his motivation. He flipped open a small notebook and readied his pen. "Mitsuru is pretty good about obtaining information quickly. You try and pull a fast one, we will know, and we will make good on our half of the deal."

Masami was literally starting to sweat. "If I tell you all that I know, you have to keep all of this between us. They will kill me if they know I said anything."

Akihiko looked back over to Mitsuru, who nodded her head. He turned back to Masami. "Fine. But we expect the same in return."

"I will also do my best to make sure you are protected from

whomever would harm you."

Mitsuru's promise almost made him sick. "That's a hell of a deal, Masami. Considering everything you've done."

But if he got any leads from his boss, it would have been worth it. Hell, he would spend his time at work making sure Masami wasn't in any danger. Assuming everything checked out.

"Fine." Masami breathed out a shaky breath, then leaned in. "But you have to promise to keep me safe!"

"Let us hear your information then."

Akihiko thought he was going to break his pen in half. He stared at the man in front of him, suddenly appearing twice as old and twice as weak. He was defeated. He had nowhere else to run. And like a criminal that was out of options, he had to talk.

Then things took a turn.

Masami opened his mouth, but not one word came out. For a moment, Akihiko thought he was stalling or was making himself sick to distract them so he could escape. But before he could ask him what he was doing, Masami lifted a hand to grip at the fabric over his heart.

Mitsuru was quicker to act than he was, throwing open her car door and shouting something at Yukari and Junpei. Akihiko shook himself out of his initial shock and leaned over to try and figure out what was happening. Masami was still gasping for air, and while that was a precursor for *bad* things, he would last for a few more minutes. His other hand lifted to grab a hold of Akihiko's sleeve, and he could have sworn Masami was trying to tell him something when he yanked on him.

Then his head tilted back, his eyes rolling over white.

There was some weird black gunk that oozed from his eyes, his mouth…

And a minute later, Masami went perfectly still.

No gasping.

No movement.

No *nothing* .

By the time Mitsuru opened the car door to pull him out, Masami was *dead* .

Chapter 92

Chapter 92

Makoto had been *terrified* when she made her decision to allow Ren to stay in her room.

Two days later, she was glad she bent the rules for once.

Ren coming out and telling her he *liked* her had been a little much for her to handle on day one, but she was slowly coming to terms with it now. Every spare minute she had, she thought of him. Every time she happened to look at her phone, she saw a message from him, ranging from a smiley face emoji to a simple *hi beautiful!* Each of them made her brain shut down, but then she would laugh and smile and go about her day with a brighter attitude.

It was a weird feeling, but she found it kind of nice.

As much as Ren liked to tell her he was a “heavy sleeper”, he sure liked to talk when they were in bed. Again, she would have been annoyed had it been any other time, but there was something about listening to his voice *now* that brought her some wonderful sleep. He talked about his hometown, about going to the beach there, how it paled in comparison to Hawaii, how he liked spending his time with friends rather than by himself. They talked about what books they had read, which movies they liked, their interests and whatnot. *Nothing* she would ever feel comfortable talking about with someone, but with Ren, it came naturally.

However, he didn’t really ask her to be his girlfriend. After calling him out on *joking* around, she figured he was serious when he told her he liked her. But she always got hung up on how *much* . Best friends kind of thing? Or did he want more? Would she offend him if she asked? It was all new to her, so maybe she just misunderstood something. And she would rather know sooner rather than later.

She had just finished her final report of the day when her phone buzzed beside her on the desk. She figured it was from Ren (it was),

but it wasn't one of his usual messages.

Let's go for a walk when you're done.

Her mind immediately went to what she could have possibly done *wrong* already. Was he upset that she never responded to his messages with something cute or funny? Was she supposed to meet him without being asked and she failed to show up? A million other thoughts ran through her head as she gathered her papers and pushed them into her bag. She felt like she was running down the hallways of the hotel to find Kawakami, and she felt out of breath when she finally did.

Kawakami said nothing to her when she turned in her papers, so Makoto figured she put up a good front.

But just when she took a seat on one of the couches in the lobby to work on a response to Ren, she felt a pair of hands on her shoulders. She jumped out of her seat, her phone gripped tightly in one hand and her other ready for a fight, but then she blinked and Ren was laughing at her.

"Sorry, sorry. I sometimes forget that you're not only super cute, but super strong and could kill me."

It took her a few seconds to catch her breath, but then she began to grow worried. "Um…w-what did you want to talk about?"

Ren looked at her in confusion, but then he shook his head and smiled. She really liked his smile. It was cute. Would that be weird to tell him? "I wanted to go for a *walk* , Makoto." He laughed again. "I'll wait for you to change."

Change?

"After all, you do owe me."

Was it her, or was Ren more smug and cocky now that he admitted he liked her? "And what do I owe you?"

She found it funny when Ren opened his mouth and no words came out. She could have *sworn* he was blushing, which in turn, made her

heat up as well. “Well, remember the last trip to the beach we took?”

Makoto felt a pressure build on her shoulders. “Um, yes?”

“I’ll just say it.” Ren inhaled and released his breath quickly enough that Makoto didn’t think the oxygen made it to his lungs. “I want to see you in a bathing suit. And it’s kind of warm out there today and you’d be more comfortable…hell, sorry. That sounds really selfish.”

He…he *wanted* to see her in a bathing suit? Why? She was sure if guys wanted to look at a girl, Ann would be the one to ask, not her. While her pride liked to tell her she wasn’t *fat* , she probably didn’t have that picture perfect body that a guy would want. She worked out. She trained with her dad. What if that was intimidating? Or not attractive?

Why was this suddenly so *hard?*

“I know what you’re thinking, Makoto, and I want you to stop.” She lifted her head to meet Ren’s eyes, and she couldn’t force herself to look away. “You’re beautiful, okay? So stop worrying about what other people are going to think. But, if it’s too much, I don’t want you to do it. I just want to walk on the beach with you.”

She felt her face warm, because she had never been called *beautiful* in her life. Minus the one time her mom called her as much when Sae did her hair all pretty for her school picture that day…

“I’ll be right back.”

The look that came to Ren’s face left her feeling dizzy, yet empowered at the same time. She thought her heart was going to explode when she reached her *(their)* room. Packing her bathing suit had been a last minute decision, because when was she going to have time to go “play” in the ocean? Or walk around with someone she had been crushing on for several weeks now and maybe he had felt the same all along?

Oh, her mother was going to cry when she got home.

Makoto was quick to change, check herself in the mirror, cringe slightly when she saw her scar on her shoulder, then threw on a

shirt and headed for the door. While she figured Ren wouldn't come right out and tell her that he suddenly didn't find her attractive, she worried he wouldn't say *anything* . And if he said *nothing,* her mind would interpret it as *dissatisfaction.*

She suddenly wished she had chosen not to pack one at all…

When she met Ren back in the lobby, he broke into a cheesy grin that never failed to make her burn. "A shirt? C'mon, it's *hot* out there."

When she was close enough to him, she lowered her head. "What if you think I'm ugly?"

She expected him to laugh, or say something Ren-like in response. Instead, he lifted her head with his fingers and forced her to look at him. "I would never think that. I can't. Even if I wanted to." His charm returned to his features and he dropped an arm over her shoulders. "What about me? Do you think I'm ugly without a shirt on?"

Oh she wasn't ready to answer *that* .

She felt him chuckle against her. "Do you need a reminder of what I look like?"

He had a way of speaking that irritated her and made her flush at the same time. She desperately wanted to learn his trade so *he* knew what *he* did to her! "Um…"

Ren said nothing to her, but escorted her outside into the very hot and humid air. It was getting late in the day, thankfully, but she was still grateful for living in Tokyo for her entire life or the humidity would have paralyzed her.

She forgot about Ren and the effects he had on her, because once he stepped away to pull his shirt over his head, she felt that heat stroke in full force. She was pretty sure he reached out to keep her from tipping over.

"Well, thank you." She had no idea why he was thanking her, but if

his grin said anything, she *knew* . “Now, it’s your turn.”

Makoto put a little more distance between them, but she wasn’t about to take off her shirt with him *looking* at her. “Um…” Plus, he was puffing his chest out like he wasn’t showing off that he had an excellent body and now she was going to ruin the moment and she would be forced to put her shirt back on and then *he* would, too.

Screw it .

If she wanted to know where Ren’s feelings truly resided, she would know now. Without thinking, she rolled her shirt up and let it rest against her neck like a pillow, hoping that it covered most of her scar. Then, she turned to Ren. “W-Well, l-let’s go…”

Ren didn’t move or even acknowledge her. He just stared at her, which made her self-conscious, and she grabbed her shirt from around her neck with her face burning in embarrassment.

“N-No…d-don’t. Sorry. W-Wow!” Ren coughed out several laughs and half-spoken words, but she felt a smile working on her face when he rubbed the back of his head, dropped his eyes, and she could *see* the blush on his cheeks. “Wow. Um…damn. Y-You, uh, you look wonderful.”

He laughed awkwardly for a few more minutes, but Makoto could start to understand his reaction. Maybe. But she wanted to *know* . “You don’t think I’m ugly, do you?”

He sighed heavily. “If you want my honest opinion without you slapping me to death, I think you’re extremely hot and I might need to sleep in Ryuji’s room tonight.”

“Oh?” Why would he need to do that? “Why?”

Ren only shook his head, then held out his hand with a genuine smile. “Never mind. Just, uh, don’t mind me too much. I might stare at you a lot.”

She did what she always did when he flustered her and threw her hands over her face. “S-Stop.”

He tugged one of her hands off her face and held it firmly in his. “This might be kind of cheesy, but I’ve always wanted to take a walk on the beach with a beautiful girl.”

Ren fell silent, but she didn’t mind. She didn’t know what to say anyway. She simply took comfort in having her hand in his, the sounds of the waves, the beautiful weather. It was peaceful. And her life had been far from such for years.

Now she wouldn’t want to leave. It would be her luck to return after a dream-like experience to have life rear its ugly head and put her back in her place.

Well, hopefully Ren would still like her when they went back.

“I know I don’t talk about this a lot, but sometimes, I regret helping that girl back home.”

They both came to a stop almost an hour later. The waves were creeping higher up on the shore, but not enough to reach their feet. Ren still held her hand tightly, but he kept his eyes out towards the sun lowering itself into the ocean. It was a nice start to the sunset, but Makoto would have enjoyed it more had Ren not brought up his past. She had no idea what to say to him other than the usual. That he did what was right. He helped someone.

It just oftentimes wasn’t enough.

“But then I start to think.” He turned to face her and his other hand reached out to take her free one. It was hard to look into his eyes, but she was pulled into him as well. “If I would have ignored her calls, I wouldn’t have been arrested. I wouldn’t have been sentenced to probation in Tokyo. I never would have met Ryuji, or Ann, or any of them.”

His hands tightened. “I never would have met you.”

Makoto was never one for words, but at that moment, she hated that she couldn’t think of something to say to him. Ren didn’t seem to mind, but when he leaned in to rest his head against hers, she suddenly forgot how to *breathe* .

“I never had a friend or anyone to walk on the beach with back home. So, being a stupid little kid, I thought it would be cool to walk down a nice beach and watch the sun set with a pretty girl, kind of like in those cheesy romantic movies and books.” He breathed out a laugh. She was still failing to function. “I would go through all that hell again, a million more times, if every time I got to share this moment with you.”

What did one say to that? *How* did one say something when they literally couldn’t *think?* All she knew was that her heart was racing, her face was heating up, and she was pretty sure she looked like a dumbstruck *idiot* staring back at him.

He thought something was funny still, but just as she was able to think of something to say to him, she felt a hand on her face. His fingers reached into her hair. His touch was soft. The tip of his nose brushed up against hers. She was sure she was going to pass out.

Then, he pulled away from her completely. She felt cold. She shivered. She thought she was going to cry. “D-Did I do something wrong?”

Ren finally looked back over at her, but his smile was sad. She felt sick. “No. I’m sorry. I just…I just don’t want to give you the wrong impression.” He rubbed the back of his head and lowered his eyes. “You’re just so cute, and sometimes it makes my brain shut off, and I don’t want to do anything stupid or forceful.”

Was…was he going to *kiss* her?! “Um…” Was she upset because he *didn’t?*

Some of the unease left her heart when he held both of her hands again. “Let’s take this one step at a time, okay? I really like your hugs. So, maybe I can get a forgiveness hug?”

He held his arms out like he was bashful, then had a look on his face to match it. It was hard to say *no* , and she even said no once, but Ren never moved. She had no choice but to give in. “Just one. And this is all you get for the day.”

His smile became more sincere and she felt her heart pick up its

pace. “I will make sure to treasure it then.”

Makoto may have forgotten that neither one of them were fully clothed like the last one was. Maybe Ren thought as much too, because he felt more tense, his heart was pounding in his chest, and she thought she felt his shoulders shake a little. When he pulled away from her, he wore that stupid grin and his hands rested on her hips.

“I like your hugs.”

She was tempted to ask him if it was okay to kiss him, if that was what *he* had wanted earlier, but she shook her head. “Um, so…can I ask…something?”

“Of course.”

Was it just her, or were his fingers moving against her skin? “Um… a-are you…am I…y-your…I guess, are you my…my boyfriend… now?”

She wanted an answer. Yes or no. What she got was a laugh, followed by another hug. “Ah, you are so cute.”

That was promising, right? “Y-Yes or no?”

He leaned back, but grabbed both of her hands with a smile stretching across his face. “Maybe I should ask you properly, huh?”

She was ready for an answer, but at the same time, she wasn’t. “W-Well…”

“I know I am only a joker, a man not fit for a queen, but I will ask you anyway.” That damn smirk was on his face again. But her mind was hazy and she couldn’t comment on it or narrow her eyes at him. “Will you bless my poor, miserable soul, and make me a happy man and be my ray of sunshine, my shred of hope, my beautiful girlfriend?”

Her response was to slam her head into his chest. She hit him a little too hard. Ren stumbled back, his arms wrapping around her for purchase, then fell over since she was *not* in the right mindset to help him. She at least didn’t seem to hurt him. In fact, he found the

entire thing *hilarious* for some reason.

“Oh. And you have to promise that your dad won’t murder me.”

She thought she was going to cry. While she never thought anyone would ask her out, nor did she ever want anyone to, she felt like she wanted nothing more. And with Ren, of all people, someone who was the complete opposite of her. It was weird, but she didn’t question the logic. She *felt* the logic. She was happy. She felt like she belonged. She felt like she had something to be proud of.

“Don’t make him mad then.”

His chest shook with laughter, then he fell silent. Makoto came to rest against his side, since his arms wouldn’t let her roll off of him. For an hour or so (she lost track of time), they watched the sun set, but she snapped out of her daze when she felt the waves brush against their feet. The water was cool. It was late. But she didn’t want to get up.

“We should head back.”

Her inner strict self was very unhappy with her mentality, because she did not want to head back. She could have slept on the beach, tucked inside the comfort of Ren’s arms, but she figured it would be wise to head inside before the waves carried them out into the ocean. Safety.

She did, however, break her internal promise. When Ren asked her if it was okay to “continue their beach snuggles” in their room, she didn’t even blink and got under the covers next to him.

She heard him whisper into her ear, “You’re super cute, Makoto,” right before she drifted off to sleep.

For the first time in her life, when she woke up, Makoto wanted to stay where she was. Ren didn’t let her go anyway, nor did he try and convince her to get up. They were leaving that morning, and she always had to be that person who was too early to everything, but she had no motivation. She didn’t care. It was weird.

“We should probably get up, or we will miss our flight.”

If anything, Ren pulled her into him tighter. “Let’s miss it then.”

Slowly but surely, she was finding her strength to sit up. “My parents would lose their minds, and I couldn’t keep my promise because my father *would* murder you.” She poked him in the chest. She had no idea where the desire to do that came from. “Unless you only wanted to act like this here.”

That got him to sit up. He had to rub the sleep from his eyes. “What? No. I was *finally* able to ask you out. I’m not about to let you slip away just yet!”

To emphasize his point, he lopped his arms around her middle and pulled him back into him. His hair tickled her neck, but she found herself laughing anyway. “Well, then let’s get ready. Or I will leave you here.”

“Yes, my Queen.”

It was easy to push away from him, but she knew he saw her (or felt) her blush.

However, she quickly resumed her role as student council president, albeit a little *late* , to make sure all the students were accounted for. It was hard not to be in the comfort of Ren’s presence as she finished up the last of her duties, but he was not afraid to shoot her a text and remind her that he was there and she was cute and stupid Ren things.

It became harder when she was sitting on the plane. Not that she was sure Ren wanted everyone to know they were dating, but having him sit next to her would have helped her anxiety. It was a wonderful trip, overall. There had been some issues, personal and work-related, but she enjoyed her time. She managed to pick up some nice souvenirs for her sister, her parents, and for Futaba since she couldn’t go. The beaches were just as beautiful as the brochures had made them out to be. And while she technically went on the trip to work, she found herself having more fun *not* working and acting like that normal teenager Ren said she should be.

So what did that say about her return? How were things back home?

They were only gone a few days, but had something happened and Futaba and Morgana were alone to fight off the threat? Apparently, Mishima continued to monitor the situation, but if he told Ren, Ren never told her.

Were her parents okay? Did Sae have time to find some sort of evidence to keep their dad in prison this time around? Had her mom and dad not been able to survive without her being around to keep them together?

Worst of all, how was she going to tell them about Ren? She assumed it would be easier to tell her mother, but after her warning to be careful, would Ren asking her out lead to her thinking *other* things happened? She sure as hell wasn't going to tell them she slept next to him the last night of their trip. Ren would be a dead man come morning.

She tried to keep her focus on all the good things the trip did for her. She was much more relaxed. She was starting to think that it didn't matter what people thought of her or her work ethic. She thought that maybe it was okay not to *think* . Well, at least too much. She still wanted to help people. She still had her own personal image to uphold.

Makoto couldn't tell if she was excited or nervous when they reached Tokyo, they all begrudgingly headed to their own lines (Ryuji complained the loudest), and Ren chose to "walk her to her line".

"Are you going to tell them?"

She assumed he was referring to if she would tell her parents they were "dating" now. "D-Do you want me to?"

Ren only shrugged his shoulders. "I mean, I wouldn't tell you not to. So long as you seriously promise me your dad isn't going to murder me."

She tried to give him a smile to calm him. He seemed kind of nervous. "I'm sure he wouldn't murder you."

He released a breath slowly. “I hope not. I’d like to spend some more time with you.”

She looked away with a blush growing on her face. “W-Well…m-maybe I’ll tell them…tomorrow?”

He reached for her hand. “Whenever you want. But…” He paused and her heart crashed in her chest. “Let’s not tell the others. Just yet. I-Is that okay?”

It was odd to see him more nervous about asking her not to tell their friends and perfectly fine when he allowed her to tell her parents. She squeezed his hand anyway, hoping to ease some of that nervousness. “It’s okay, Ren. A-Assuming Ann…doesn’t already know…”

Ren broke out into a smile and breathed out a laugh. “You’re right. We can talk more later. I want to head home and check on Morgana. He was kinda upset that we didn’t take him with us.”

Before she knew what he was doing, he wrapped his arms around her shoulders and gave her a light hug. It wasn’t long, but it left her burning regardless. “Y-Yes…um…p-please let me know…how he is.”

His smile turned more cocky. “I hope you dream of me.”

She rolled her eyes and walked off before he burned her alive. She could still hear his laugh in her head on the train back home.

It came to a stop when she stood outside her apartment, took a deep breath, then opened the door.

As expected, her mother was the first to greet her. But she didn’t seem all that chipper and happy and ready to bombard her with questions like she thought. “You’re home.”

Makoto didn’t really know what to do. So, since she dropped her eyes to the bag in her hand, she held it up to hopefully clear some tension. “Um, I have gifts for you.”

Her mom smiled at her, but Makoto knew it was fake. Her heart

started to hurt, and she was terrified to comment on it. “That was thoughtful of you.”

A few seconds later, she couldn’t contain it. “I-Is everything…okay?”

“Ah, sorry.” Her mom stepped up to her and dropped an arm over her shoulder. “It’s just been an odd…day.”

“Why?” Did something happen between her mom and dad? Where was her dad? She was honestly surprised he didn’t pick her up at the airport or the train station or…

“What did you get for me?”

They both took a seat on the couch, and while Makoto desperately wanted to know where her dad was, she reached into her bag and found the gift she bought for her. “It’s not much, but…the vendor said this was the dessert they were known for in the city.”

There was some life back to her mom’s face and it made her feel so much better. “What? You only brought one? What if I need more?”

Makoto sank back in her seat and tried not to roll her eyes. “I’m sure you can make it yourself.”

“Makoto?”

Both her and her mother turned as her dad came into the room. The first thing she noted was that he looked so *tired* . Not that he really was anything different, but it had been a few days. It still made her sad. “Are you okay?”

He exhaled deeply and he leaned against the wall. “How was your trip?”

Makoto suddenly remembered that there had been a hit on him, on her, on her entire family. While she had been gone, had they worried that maybe someone had followed her and maybe killed her in a different country? She had sent her mom a message every night before bed, but did she not tell her dad?

“I…” Makoto reached into her bag and found her gift for him. “I have

something for you."

Her gift for him had been a little childish, but she *made* it for him. Her and Ann had taken a free hour to roam around the town and they both stopped into a hobby store that looked nice. Ann gave her a wink and told her *"don't you have a special boy you could give this to?"*

"I made it." Maybe it was too childish, but it was Ann's words that made her want to give it to him. Ren would have thoroughly enjoyed it, she knew that, but…she did tell her dad that he would always be her number one boy…

"I know it's not really all that nice, and I'm not really good at making crafts…"

Finally, her dad came to stand close enough to her that she could hand him the little charm. "It's cute."

Makoto felt her face warm. Her dad never thought anything was *cute* . "Th-Thank you…"

She wanted to ask him why he seemed so upset and tired and *miserable* , but when he took the seat next to her, there was a knock on the door. She noticed that he clenched his hands at his side, her charm hopefully still intact, then he was back on his feet before her mother could do the same.

Her mom tried to say something, maybe tried to stop him, but there was just a heavy silence that fell in the room. Did they know who was at the door? Did they know *why* they were there? Who could it be? Makoto was curious enough to crane her neck to try and get a better look at the entryway. Her mother startled her when she walked around the couch and to the front door, and she looked… *angry?*

What was happening?

Makoto's heart sank when she thought she heard her sister's voice. "I just wanted to swing by and give you some good news."

She was on her feet too, terrified by the tone in Sae's voice, and she

figured she could serve as a mediator if things grew out of control. She found it odd that her mom and dad didn't say anything, but if the weight of the air was an indicator, she knew they were *not* happy.

"You're under arrest, *Sanada* ."

That was when the tension in her heart snapped and Makoto pushed herself up closer to her dad. "What? Why? Sis, you can't do this!"

Sae looked over at her, likely surprised she was there, but then she shook her head and lifted a piece of paper. "You can choose to come willingly, or I can ask for the SWAT team to come drag you out. And I know they will make a scene."

Hot, angry tears filled her eyes. What the hell had happened while she was gone that provoked Sae into arresting their dad, *again?* Thankfully, her mom put an arm out to stop her and spoke for her. "You're not taking him anywhere, Sae."

But her dad held up a hand to silence them all. "It's okay."

Makoto didn't know whether to be angry or hurt by the dejected tone in his voice. "You've done nothing wrong, Aki." She could feel the heat radiating from her mom. It was intimidating. "You don't have a leg to stand on Sae. And you know it."

There was a flash of anger or pain on her sister's face, but it was gone the next second. She would rather see that than the twisted smile that she wore instead. "Oh, but I do. He's killed one of his superiors, and now we have evidence that he's linked to the murder of Makoto's principal."

Everything came to a blinding halt. Her dad *killed* someone? A boss? One of the ones that attacked her several weeks ago? There was no way. Her dad might be easy to anger, but there was always a *reason* . Kamoshida didn't just smile *kindly* at him and he beat the life out of him. He *threatened* her, and she always assumed Kamoshida probably bragged about it and that set her dad off.

But to *kill?*

And the principal?

She was too warm. Her head was spinning. Nothing made sense. Why did Sae have to do this *now?*

“You have a choice to make, but please, make it quickly, or I’ll make it for you.”

“Don’t you dare go with her Aki.”

“He *killed* a man.”

“Your father is not a killer.”

“But he’s not my father, is he?!”

“This is why you’re doing this!”

“Enough.”

Makoto jumped in her place at her dad’s words. He was loud, but still so quiet at the same time. She blinked and her tears spilled over onto her face. They were all a blur, but she saw her dad turn to face her and her mother.

“I knew this was going to happen.” He took a few steps closer to her, then he dropped a hand to her shoulder. “Take care of your mother, Makoto.”

Was…was he seriously getting arrested? *Did* he kill someone?

“She’s only doing this because she wants you to suffer!”

He turned to her mom while Makoto tried to wipe at her tears. “I’ll be okay.”

Her mom shook her head. “You leave with her and we will never see you again.”

“I’ll be okay.”

“This is why you’ve been acting like this…” Her mom finally asked the dreaded question. *“Did* you kill someone?”

He chose not to answer and turned back to Sae. “I’ll go with you.”

“Aki.”

“D-Dad…”

Sae smirked again, at least, she thought she did. It was hard to see. But she did watch her sister turn her dad around and slap the handcuffs on him. Makoto’s eyes filled with more tears as Sae grabbed him by the arm and pulled him out of the doorway.

“I suggest if either of you know anything, you inform the police right away, or I’ll have you arrested as well.”

“You will regret this, Sae.”

Either Sae wasn’t intimidated by their mother’s words or she didn’t hear them. Her mom was pretty quiet, which scared the hell out of Makoto. But Sae was gone the next second and her mother slammed the door so hard she thought she felt the building shake.

She knew she should have stayed in Hawaii.

Chapter 93

Chapter 93

Sae felt like she was walking on clouds for the first time in her life.

Forcing Akihiko out of the apartment, knowing he was defeated, was only the start. It was beautiful, in its own way, slapping the handcuffs on him in front of Minako and Makoto. It hurt him, she knew that much, and it felt *wonderful.*

To make her pride swell even more, he said nothing to her as she pushed him out of the complex and to her car. She may have smiled at herself when she *accidently* shoved his head into the frame of the door when she pushed him in. "Sorry. Watch your head next time, Sanada."

Sae slammed the door before he had a chance to give her a look or say a word to her. She felt happy. Ecstatic. Invincible. This was the moment in her life she had been waiting for. She wanted him to *hurt* . She wanted to be the one who *made* him hurt. And the moment had been evading her for long enough. It was time to put him in his place.

She slid into her seat and started the car, her smile spreading over her face as she caught him slam his head back into his seat. He was defeated, and he knew it. "You should be proud of me. After all, I'm about to win a huge victory once you get thrown into prison."

"I didn't kill anyone..."

It was a mumble, but Sae heard it loudly enough. Did she think he killed the principal? No, but it wasn't anything she would tell him. It also served as a hell of a bargaining chip to use to get information *he knew* about the Phantom Thieves.

Did he kill his boss? She thought he could have. But that didn't matter to her now. The only thing that mattered was the utter joy she felt crushing him in the palm of her hand. "Come now. You can be

honest with me, *Father* ."

She pulled out of the parking lot with another satisfied smirk when he dropped his head to his chest. "Why? Why are you doing this?"

Her hands tightened on the steering wheel. "You should know the answer to that."

"You hate me this much..."

"I told you before," she said, trying to remain focused on the roads and not on the sudden burst of anger in her chest. "You will regret the day you disowned me and my sister."

Akihiko was quiet for a long time. Then, "I've regretted it since the day you were born."

He had a way of getting under her skin, even when she was finally *proud* . "You've always been a good *liar.* "

"If I could go back and do it all again, I would never have done this to you."

Sae was sure she could pull the steering wheel out of its place if she tried hard enough. "But you can't, can you?"

She caught him throwing his head back again and turning to look out the window. "No. I can't."

Sae didn't try and provoke him again, only because she was *furious* when she had been so happy before she was foolish enough to talk to him. However, there was something deep, *deep* down inside her that *hurt* when she heard him speak.

"I'm sorry, Sae..." He said it again, three times, until he simply ran out of willpower. It was hard to listen to, but she was still so *angry* . If only he could have been sorry when she was younger, before she was born, or before Makoto was born, then maybe she could have forgiven him.

She would *never* forgive him now. No matter how hard he tried to convince her he was sorry. No matter how pathetic he sounded. No

matter what he was willing to change or prove to her. They were stupid, pretty *words.*

He dug his own grave. She was just tending to his plot of land.

Thankfully, the rest of the drive was done in silence. In that silence, Sae tried to focus on the next step in her process. Her and her team would be interrogating Akihiko as soon as they arrived at the station. She had tried to tell them all she would be fine on her own, but as soon as she did, her team jumped down her throat.

"You didn't even want to arrest him to begin with!"

"We're letting you make the arrest on your own. That's good enough."

"We sure as hell don't want you defending him behind closed doors again."

She was just relieved that no one had brought up the accusation about him being her *father* or she would have murdered someone. Akihiko's bosses were the only ones to *assume* as much, and now one was dead, but she didn't want that tidbit to hang in the air for Akechi or her boss or whoever else wanted to speculate over it...

Once she pulled into her parking spot, she chanced a look back to Akihiko. He was still gazing out the window with a sorrowful expression, but then his eyes turned to hers. "Can I ask you one thing?"

She would have told him *no* had he not spoken in her hesitation. "Would taking the fall for everything that's happened really make you happy?"

It was a question she knew the answer to, but telling him as much was suddenly too difficult to do. He had to know something about a lead to catch the Phantom Thieves, if he wasn't one himself. But she suddenly worried he was doing this to please *her* rather than be honest. Initially, it didn't matter to her, but now, it made her think. And she was at the wrong place in time to *stop* and *think* .

The moment was upon her. She had waited her entire life for it. She

couldn't stop now.

So, she didn't give him an answer and pushed herself out of the car. She took slight pleasure in yanking him out of the backseat and dragging him in through the front lobby. The entire station was quiet, eerily quiet, which was worrisome and redeeming at the same time.

She knew how much the force respected Akihiko. Now, they were either stunned into silence and needed a minute before the rage exploded, or they were starting to believe that he wasn't the great guy everyone painted him to be.

Either way, she pulled on his arm until she came face to face with the two men who would be "aiding" in her interrogation. "Well, I'm impressed, Niijima-san. I didn't think you had it in you."

Sae pushed Akihiko into the commissioner, hoping to hurt both of them. "Let's get this started quickly so we can make the arrests on the others involved."

Akihiko, again, said nothing as they made their way to the chosen interrogation room. She did notice that his expression changed from sad to pissed, and to some degree, it elated her. She could deal with him being angry. Because he had no right. He did this to himself. He chose to associate with criminals. He chose to abandon her and her sister. If he was to be angry at anyone, it was himself.

She was so angry herself that the second he was handcuffed to the chair across the table from her, she slapped her palms down on the surface and leaned into his face with the most intimidating glare she could give. "Don't you dare think about wasting my time. Mitsuru won't come save you. You're going to jail. How long, depends on *you* ."

"I'm disappointed in you."

Akihiko met her glare with one of his own, but his words cut her *deeply* . She was sure it showed on her face, which frustrated her even more.

"I used to think at one point in time, you had a good head on your

shoulders. Yeah, you can be scary, and maybe that helps you win your cases, but you've fallen so far." He had the audacity to smirk and chuckle under his breath. "You're really *stupid* if you think I'm going to say anything to you."

He held her stare for another second before she huffed and pushed herself back. *He* had another thing coming if he could try and *insult* her when she *knew* he *knew* .

"I'm disappointed in you."

Of all things he had to say to her, *that* was the knife. While she knew he was never *proud* of her, no matter what he said, he was *never* disappointed. She figured hearing him say as much would set her off, make her bash his head into a wall, but she felt the exact opposite.

It *hurt* ...

Maybe he was acting tough to keep the other men on their toes. Akihiko probably wouldn't want to have a breakdown about how sorry he was for ruining her life in front of them...

But still...

"Tell us about what happened to Masami."

The police commissioner came into her view, but her mind had a hard time jumping back into the conversation. Now she was irritated with herself. Hopefully no one noticed.

"I was asking him about his role in that threat on my life." Akihiko leaned back in his chair like he was comfortable. "He started to panic and had a heart attack, I'm assuming."

Sae had heard about some of the brass, particularly Masami, not being the best of people, but never facing any criminal charges. Someone who constantly butted heads with Akihiko was never a *good* person, according to her findings. However, the situation itself had a lot of open questions. The fact that Akihiko hadn't even *blinked* about a man dying in his supposed care made her blood start to boil again.

"Interesting." Masami's "partner in crime", Kishita, dropped a file in front of Akihiko. "Autopsy report tells us otherwise."

She caught the half second nervous look that flitted across Akihiko's face. "And how did the coroner think he died then? Shock? Drug overdose?"

The police commissioner dropped his hands to the table and smiled. "Apparently, someone *beat* him to death."

Instead of striking fear or confusion into him, Akihiko laughed dryly. "Yeah, okay. Pretty sure I would have left a mark. And I can tell you that he didn't have any bruises on him when I last saw him."

"You have a history of violence, Sanada." The commissioner lifted the file into his hand and flipped through the pages. Kishita began roaming around the room. While she hadn't seen the man's body, nor had she read the report, she knew Akihiko only reacted so violently when he was provoked. Even still, he never *killed* someone with brute strength before.

Masami did threaten Makoto. And if that was the case this time around, they all had another thing coming. She'd find out who else was involved and let Akihiko beat them to death, too. Then she could lock him in a cell until he confessed to *her* case.

"I tend to get pretty pissed off when people threaten my life." Akihiko shook his head. "But I didn't touch him. So I'm guessing the coroner was busy and just signed your document to make it *look* real."

Kishita sat himself down on the table next to Akihiko. "You never liked Masami. You argued with the principal at Shujin. You hated Kamoshida. You were angry at Kaneshiro's men. And I'm pretty sure they are all either *dead* or had been a victim of your assaults, yes?" She could hear the smile in Kishita's voice. "And you did just say that Masami threatened you, and you don't take kindly to that, do you?"

"No, I don't." Akihiko sighed heavily. "Do you have any pictures of these supposed injuries for me to tell you exactly how hard I hit him?"

The room was silent. Sae would have rolled her eyes at Akihiko's cheery demeanor had she been alone. Or she would have slapped him. He was far too arrogant for a man in the serious position he was in. However, loathe as she was to admit, she found it funny that neither the commissioner nor Kishita had prepared as thoroughly as they had said they did. Akihiko was a cop. He interrogated criminals, too. They were stupid thinking they could bait him over supposed evidence. Especially evidence she hadn't seen for herself.

But Kishita stood from his seat, and Sae could tell from his posture that he was *pissed* . "I think you hit him about this hard."

And he decked Akihiko right in the jaw hard enough that she thought she heard a crack. It surprised Sae, but it wasn't too uncommon for police to be a little aggressive when criminals weren't responding like they should have. A little blood was a small price to pay for the truth. She doubted the force of the hit was necessary, but she let it slide. Maybe that would get Akihiko to stop acting so damn cocky...

But it didn't. "Yeah, I think he would have a pretty decent bruise on his face, but I think when I'm pissed, I hit harder."

When Kishita made eye contact with the police commissioner, something cold landed in Sae's stomach. "Well then, I guess we'll just have to find out exactly how hard you hit him until *you're* dead."

Akihiko was trained enough to turn his head with the next punch, but he didn't fare as well with the counterstrike. The force of it knocked Akihiko over onto his side. When she saw the smirk on both the commissioner and Kishita's faces, her mind raced to find ways to stop this beat down so she could get her information and get out. She needed names. If she got between them, maybe Akihiko would be more inclined to tell her.

But that all changed when Kishita reared his foot back and kicked Akihiko in the chest hard enough that he coughed out a bit of blood. "I'm sure that wasn't nearly as hard as *you* could have kicked him, right?"

Everything happened in slow motion for several minutes. Sae cursed under her breath for not realizing that this had been their

plan all along, since Masami was *so* important to them. That or this was the only way to trap Akihiko so they *could* beat him up for humiliating them all for years.

But he was defenseless. If his hands weren't handcuffed behind him, if he wasn't strapped to his chair, he would have fought back. And he would have *destroyed* both of them. And Sae *might* let him.

Sae was going to try and remind them that they had arrested him to gain leads on the Phantom Thieves, but before she could try, Kishita stomped his foot down on Akihiko's knee, something that made him cry out in pain.

It shook Sae more than his earlier insult.

Akihiko was a tough guy. The only time she ever saw him *hurt* had been when she made him hurt. But there was something different about hearing his cry. Especially since she was reminded that he had suffered that injury because of her sister. He saved Makoto, to which she would forever thank him, silently. Even if she wanted Makoto to suffer because she was *stupid* , she wouldn't know what to do if Makoto had been shipped off that day. Sae told herself several times, usually late into the night, that she should have tried harder to convince Makoto to stay away, to have someone follow her around, to tip off Akihiko so *he* knew and wouldn't have been shot...

"What's wrong? Still not as painful as *you* would have made it?"

It happened again. And again. And again. It took Sae a few seconds to shake herself out of her dread and walk around the table to grab hold of Kishita's arm. It took her another second to find her voice. "This is enough. I need him to be able to speak to me about the Phantom Thieves. This is only going to keep him quiet."

His eyes narrowed at her. "Protecting dear ol' dad again, are we?"

The comment had her releasing his arm. "W-What?"

For emphasis, Kishita smashed his foot back onto Akihiko's knee with a smirk. "Most children don't like to see their parents in pain."

He kicked him in the stomach next, and hearing Akihiko's strangled cough made her feel incredibly small in front of Kishita. "No matter how much they try and claim otherwise."

Was this a ploy? Had this been his motive the entire time, to see if she would defend Akihiko, *again* , or not? It was effective, she would give him that, but she could *not* let him know as much. "You're making it impossible for me to get the information I need out of him if you render him speechless and uncooperative."

He shrugged his shoulders. "I guess you do have a point." Instead of giving Akihiko some time to catch his breath, Kishita grabbed a fistful of hair and yanked him back up into a seated position. Then, he grinned madly at her and produced a long needle. "I don't think he'll talk much without some *help.* "

He stuck it into the side of his injured knee before she could tell him to stop. Akihiko doubled over to try and bite back the painful cry, but Kishita continued to jerk the needle around. His eyes never left her own. She could have sworn he caught her hesitation.

"What? You want your information, yes?"

She thought she was going to be sick. "I do, but sticking him with a drug administered *incorrectly* will do nothing for me."

Kishita pulled the needle out of him, but Akihiko continued to lean forward to hide his pain. It was probably for the best. Sae was already a mix of emotions when she needed to keep a clear head. Seeing his face might send her plummeting over the edge.

"Is this what you wanted?"

Sae had been expecting some kind of nasty retort from Kishita, but Akihiko's muffled voice ripped at her heart more than she wanted to admit. She suddenly found it hard to breathe. *Stay strong.* "I want names, Sanada."

She hoped he had heard her, because she did *not* sound as strong as she had thought. She was going to repeat herself, for the sake of her own pride, when he went into a coughing fit. Sae knew a little

about first aid and signs of internal bleeding, but she never thought she would have to put it to use with a man who never could stay down for long.

But when he leaned back, turning to wipe the blood on his face onto his sleeve, Sae didn't want to think about the extent of the damage. "I have nothing more to say to you. Any of you." He coughed again and she had to remind herself that she was *angry* with him and not hurting and wanting to help ease his pain. "You never wanted information. You only wanted my head. So stop fucking *teetering* and take it!"

It may be one of the few times she wanted to run and hide because he was angry at her. It almost, *almost* made her tell him she was sorry...

"Stubborn little bastard, isn't he?"

Sae surprised herself when she straightened her back and came face to face with Kishita and his *annoying* smirk. "This is enough. We will try and question him later." She stepped into him and tried her best to keep her voice calm and *not* vengeful. "And if you try and interfere again..."

He lost his smug look and glared at her, hard. "And I suggest you learn your place, *Sanada-san* ."

His words sparked that dying fire and she latched onto his arm before he could move around her. "Don't you *dare* call me that."

"Then sit in the back, keep your mouth shut, and enjoy the show." One of his hands fell to Akihiko's shoulders. Sae had to bite her tongue to keep herself from snapping at him. "I'll *try* and be nicer this time." The grin returned. "If you stick around, maybe he'll finally confess."

The police commissioner, who had been quiet for so long Sae forgot he was there, stood next to her. "Either you stand here and wait for your confession, or we will see to it that you lose your job, *everything* you've taken pride in for the last few years."

An hour ago, it would have been the easiest decision she would have ever made.

But now, it wasn't.

The only way she managed to find the strength to nod her head was because Akihiko would be fine. They wouldn't kill him. He might be furious with her, but it wasn't like she planned on ever forgiving him and having a relationship with him again. Her job was all she had. If she lost that because she chose that *one* moment to be *weak* , she would have *nothing* .

She had lived without needing her family for long enough. It wouldn't matter to her now.

But when the men walked out of the room almost three hours later for a "break", she started to regret her decision. Kishita had been *more* brutal if anything. The commissioner could sense when Sae wanted to intervene and reminded her of her position. All while Akihiko took every hit like he was a brick wall and never said a word...

However, neither the police commissioner nor Kishita realized she didn't leave the room when they did. Sae figured it was a trap, but if they could beat Akihiko this badly and walk away, the cameras were off. Mitsuru would *love* to use that against them if they were operational...

But instead of running out of the room, she found herself kneeling beside where they had left Akihiko on the floor. She figured she needed to move quickly or they would both come back into the room and catch her being *nice* . She still had an image to maintain...

He was a lot heavier than she thought, but she managed. Once Akihiko was sitting back up again, Sae grabbed the other chair and pulled it to sit next to him. "Are you okay?"

It wasn't what she wanted to say. But before she could ask him about her case, Akihiko tilted his head back and took a deep breath. "They threatened you?"

Sae knew the *minute* she told him the truth, she would regret it. She hadn't needed him in the past. Why would she need him *now?* "I'm fine. You, on the other hand, need to stop pissing off the wrong people and-,"

"Are you happy?"

His question made her stop. Was she happy? No. Would she admit that? Never. Not to the person who made her so *unhappy* in the first place.

His cough brought her attention back to him. "I know you hate me, Sae, and I've tried to live with it." He coughed again, then leaned his head on the table. "But I *can't* . Not when you've become...whatever you are."

Her hands clenched on her knees. "Yes, I know you're so *disappointed* in me."

"I love you." Her heart dropped into her stomach. "But you're not seeking justice, Sae. You're seeking vengeance."

She almost threw up, but he didn't stop. "And now that you finally have your moment of glory, you stop them."

She looked away from him and pushed herself to her feet. "I didn't ask them to *beat* you. I don't give a damn about anything other than *my* case. And I know you know something. So if you-,"

"You still care." Sae bit her tongue as she watched him sit up straight. "You still hurt when I'm hurt. You still want to do what's right. Because you wouldn't have stopped them if you didn't *care* ."

Sae grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and yanked him as close to her as she could. "Don't you *ever* think I care about you."

"You can try to deny it all you want, but you're still in there." She released him when she saw his smirk. "You're my daughter. And a *Sanada* never gives up, no matter how many times they're knocked down."

Sae could only stand in the middle of the room, looking and feeling

like an *idiot.* She hated him. She hated that he used one of her deepest and unknown secret desires to call her his daughter, a *Sanada* , against her...

There was no way she would ever forgive him or *love* him again, but then why did she stop the interrogation for his sake? Why couldn't she have simply asked to step out of the room? Why did she always have to *defend* him when he couldn't do it himself?

Makoto. Makoto would be furious with her if she found out her well-respected older sister had let people brutally assault their father. Minako would have been furious, too, but Makoto didn't deserve her hatred. Minako, a little. Akihiko, all of it.

But she was tired. She hated everything. She couldn't trust anyone. But no matter how hard life got, how many people grew upset with her, Akihiko popped up in her life right when she was at her breaking point and reminded her that *hatred* was a beautiful motivator.

At least, she thought that was what it was...

A knock interrupted her thought process. She had half a second to compose herself, but before she could brace herself with an excuse, the door was rudely shoved open. Sae expected Mitsuru to barge in at some point while Akihiko was locked up, but she felt herself growing small under the glare of the elder.

She actually thought she could handle the commissioner and Kishita better right now.

"What is wrong with you?"

I did nothing wrong!

Akechi chose that moment to rush into the room as well. "I'm sorry, Sae-san. We tried to stop her."

"You will release him immediately. Or I'll see to it that you are placed in a holding cell for your gross abuse of power."

What Sae never liked to admit to herself was that Mitsuru was a dangerous opponent. Not only that, but she had been some kind of

"aunt" figure for her before Makoto was born. Sae learned to deal with having to butt heads with her, but when Mitsuru threatened her, Sae caved. The *last* thing they needed was the Kirijo group making a scene.

However, she *had* to stand her ground. She *had* to keep hating Akihiko. She *had* to win this case, for her own sake. "Sanada is in our care for two counts of murder and an association with a group of terrorists." Sae did her best to keep her back straight and shoulders steady. "And I'll have *you* arrested for conspiracy if I find out you are associated with any of his crimes."

She was proud of herself when Mitsuru fell silent. Not that Mitsuru was likely going to walk away without another word, but maybe she had called her out on her bluff and now she had no idea how to respond.

"I-It's okay, Mitsuru."

Mitsuru didn't even blink and reached into her bag, retrieved a file, and handed it to her. "I would advise you to re-evaluate your position, Sae. Have Akihiko released by the end of the day, or the press conference I have scheduled for the morning will turn your office inside out."

Sae gripped the file in her hands as Mitsuru turned to head for the door. "I'll await your decision. If I hear nothing from you by midnight, I'll assume you wish to challenge me."

And she was out the door the next second.

Sae spared one last look to Akihiko, then regretted it. She grabbed Akechi's arm and pulled him out of the room and into the hallway. His eyes fell to the file in her hands.

"What did she give you?"

She didn't need to look at each piece of paper in the folder to know the game Mitsuru was playing. And she was *furious* . The few documents Sae had looked at had been past convictions that had been a stretch and had very little or no evidence. Most of the

"criminals" had caved under her pressure, like she was hoping would happen with Akihiko, and had never reached a courtroom or the public's attention. If these details were released to the public, it would make her look bad. She couldn't have that. Not right now anyway. Not when she needed *one thing* to go *right.*

"What are you going to do, Sae-san?"

Plus, if word got out that a respected man like Akihiko had been beaten in an interrogation she was in charge of, she could find herself at the losing end of a lawsuit, losing the little bit of pride she had left and Makoto's love for her.

"I think we should release him."

Sae had not intended on Akechi flipping sides over a few pieces of paper. "Why?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Clearly, he's not going to talk. The pressure is mounting, but it's not enough. Plus, we have no *real* evidence." The teen pushed himself off the wall and offered her a smile. "But I do have a few hunches I'd like to investigate on my own. Plus, I enjoy working with you. And going out for sushi."

She groaned and rubbed the sides of her head. "If you can magically make all of this disappear before the end of the year, I would buy you sushi until you never want to eat it again."

Akechi threw his head back and laughed. When he stopped, Sae thought she saw some hint of *darkness* in his eyes.

"I'll do just that."

Chapter 94

Chapter 94

Every emotion had been pushed to the max.

Minako was pissed more than anything. Extremely pissed. She just didn't know who she was more pissed off with; Sae or Akihiko. Sae had only arrested Akihiko because she hated him for so long and now had her supposed chance to humiliate him. Akihiko did *nothing* , barely said a word, and Minako was sure he was only being cooperative since it was Sae.

Which led her to the damning question eating away at her heart: Had Akihiko killed someone? Minako had known him for a majority of her life, so she doubted he would have. The schoolteacher that threatened Makoto deserved a beat down. But, had the other officers not interfered, would Akihiko have killed him? So if that was a possible outcome, *could* he have lost control again and *didn't* stop?

He had a snap temper, but he *never* took it out on someone who didn't set him off. He would go to the gym or run around the block or come home and talk to her about it. However, Akihiko had been very distant after their trip. He had come home last night in a panic and he never did tell her *why* . He just sat on the bed, hands pulling at his hair, and said nothing. He didn't eat a lot. He barely spoke. He seemed *frightened* , if she was being honest.

And it made her *sick* .

Had that been the real reason Akihiko walked off with Sae? Because he *knew* he was guilty? Because had it been an accident, Akihiko would have told her as much…right?

"Dad didn't kill anyone…d-did he?"

She felt bad for Makoto. She seemed like she had such a wonderful trip, and then got a seriously rude awakening upon her return. The

question in her voice did nothing to help Minako's confidence, but she thought she knew Akihiko well enough to know he would have told her if he killed someone. Or he would have turned himself in that same night.

She was exhausted. She was confused. She was hurt. She was angry. But Akihiko wasn't a *killer* . "No. He didn't kill anyone." She lacked the confidence in her tone, so Makoto clearly didn't buy it. "He might *know* something, but he wouldn't have killed unless… unless it was to protect us."

Was that what happened? She figured if that was the case, Akihiko would have been *pissed* instead of afraid. Or maybe killing a human, even if it was to protect his family, caused him to mentally *snap* .

Makoto clasped her hands together on her lap. When she thought she saw tears building in her eyes, Minako shook her head. "So, tell me about your trip."

Her daughter scowled, but kept her head lowered. "How can I talk about my trip when my father gets arrested for *murder?"*

"Makoto," she started quietly. "I honestly have no idea what happened. He was acting very strange yesterday, so…maybe he did. I don't know. I just…" She sighed heavily. "I just don't know what else to say."

Neither of them said much for the rest of the afternoon, but Makoto told her she was tired and going to bed and Minako didn't try and stop her. She really did want to hear about her trip, if she even *had* a good time or not, if she had been afraid of Ren or if she had spent some time with him…

But right before she was going to go to bed herself, another knock came to the door. She knew it wasn't Sae, and if by chance it was, she didn't want to answer the door. Yukari had been oddly quiet since they all returned. She also knew that if the knocking persisted, it might wake Makoto, and she really didn't want to add more to her list of problems after her trip of a lifetime.

Mitsuru was the one who was knocking, but Minako was more

focused on Ken and the fact he was supporting a barely conscious Akihiko. Her initial reaction was to call him out by name, then reach out to him. When her hands found his face, he cringed and pulled away, and that was when she saw the blood. The dark purple under his eye. The gash on his lip.

“W-What happened to you?”

“We can talk inside.”

Minako allowed Ken to walk past her, but she just stood there, shocked, *horrified* . If Akihiko had really killed someone, he wouldn’t have lied about it, especially if Sae asked him point-blank. So how the hell did he return hours later *beaten* half to death?

Mitsuru was kind enough to pull her along inside, then shut the door behind them. The click of the door caused her to snap back to reality. She shook her head, took a few deep breaths, then walked into the living room where Ken had placed Akihiko.

“I’ll get some ice.”

She only nodded as Ken walked off into the kitchen. Minako came to kneel beside Akihiko, grabbed his hand, and spoke with a soft voice so she didn’t agitate any injuries. “What happened?”

He looked like he was going to speak, but he ended up coughing a few times instead. Minako felt her blood run cold when he lifted a hand to wipe the blood off his mouth. “I…I’m okay.”

“You are *not* okay.” She tried hard not to squeeze his hand too much, but she was beginning to get angry again. “Please tell me Sae didn’t do this to you.”

Akihiko tried to laugh, but it came out a strangled cough. “No…”

Minako found it hard to believe. “Then when were you attacked?”

“He was assaulted by the policemen who were in the interrogation room with your daughter.”

Ken came around the corner and handed her a bag of ice, but she

didn't reach out for it. Her eyes instead searched for Mitsuru. "He was beaten by police?"

Mitsuru walked closer to the couch they were all standing around, but there was a hint of darkness in her eyes. "The only reason he was released was because Sae would have gone to court for malpractice."

Minako came to her feet. "You threatened my daughter with a lawsuit?"

"I did."

She shot a glare down to Akihiko, who may or may not have been able to pay attention to their conversation. She tried speaking to him anyway. "Did you kill someone, Aki?"

The deafening silence made her sink back to her knees. So Sae had been correct. He *had* killed someone. And why had Mitsuru threatened Sae and not whoever physically harmed Akihiko?

"I didn't kill anyone."

Akihiko's voice was quiet, but she heard him. "Then why have you been so distant? Why have you been so terrified?" She felt tears burn her eyes. "Why did you go so willingly with her if you didn't *do* anything?!"

Mitsuru came to his defense. "It's not what it seems."

Minako tried not to cry. "Then tell me what happened!"

She noticed Akihiko trying to sit up on the couch, but Ken had to help him once he started coughing. "I…I didn't kill anyone."

It hurt to see him like this. Whoever had beat him did a fantastic job. She didn't want to see what bruises would come in the morning, or over the course of the rest of the week. But she worried the most damage had been done knowing Sae had a chance to stop the assault and chose not to.

Did she try? Was she really in the room with him? Sae might have

hated him, but…to watch something like this…?

“Akihiko and I were speaking to a gentleman about his role in the threat on your family.” Mitsuru let out a long sigh. “The man was going to tell us those who were involved at the top of this corruption, but…”

“I didn’t kill him…”

Mitsuru met her eyes. “He had a heart attack. A suspected victim of a mental shutdown.”

“I didn’t kill anyone…”

Minako lowered herself back to her knees and placed her hand on Akihiko’s arm. “Did you tell Sae that?”

“…No…”

She couldn’t contain her question. “Was…Was she in the room… with you?”

Akihiko didn’t answer her, but he didn’t have to. His expression gave it away for him. She opted to change the subject altogether so Akihiko could try and get some rest. He still looked like he was in a bit of pain.

“I guess…thank you, for bringing him back home.” She used the sleeve of her shirt to wipe at her eyes. “I’ll make sure he gets some rest.”

Ken stood next to her after a slight nod of his head. “I know the others have been kinda shook up about this death, but don’t hesitate to ask us for help.”

Mitsuru nodded as well. “I will be in touch with Sae and her team as the week continues. I will be sure to stay in touch with you.”

What Minako didn’t tell Mitsuru was that *she* was going to be in touch with Sae *very* soon.

And with each passing second, her anger intensified. Akihiko had to

use her as a crutch as she walked with him to their room, once again favoring his left leg for reasons she didn't want to think about. She had to tell him to stop resisting her when she tried wiping the blood off his face with a rag. She knew there would be a bruise, or two, in the morning. He grimaced when she removed his shirt, but then he had to be the one to reach out to her when she noticed the fresh bruises and dark blotches on his chest, his stomach, his arms…

"I-I'll be okay…"

She couldn't stop the tears again. How could Sae allow this to happen? Had she done this before in the past? Were any of the bruises from *her?* Akihiko was kind enough to allow her to cry into his shoulder, hopefully a spot that was uninjured, but she felt him shift from time to time, so she doubted it.

Akihiko didn't last much longer, which she was grateful for. Mitsuru had given her a bottle of heavy pain medication, and she had forced Akihiko to take it almost an hour ago. She watched him sleep fairly peacefully that night. He didn't seem to be in pain. He didn't seem to be scared that someone had died in front of him. He didn't seem to be hurting because his daughter allowed for this kind of brutality.

But before he was even awake, Minako left a note for both Akihiko and Makoto that she had to step out early, and she was out the door right when the sun started to rise. The commute to Kasumigaseki was a bit more cramped than she was used to, but her mind was focused and she didn't care about being pressed into five other people.

If Sae wasn't in her office, she would wait for her. If she ran into Akechi again, she would tell him off. She would set that entire place ablaze before they denied her a chance to speak to Sae. And she was pretty sure she struck fear in some of the people roaming around the courthouse. One young man actually stood back against the wall as she walked down the hall to the staircase.

But she didn't change her attitude.

Not until she barged right into Sae's office, uncaring of who was in

there or what was happening.

It was her lucky day.

Sae was sitting behind her desk, alone, so Minako slammed the door shut behind her. “Good morning.”

She thought she saw Sae squirming in her seat. “I know why you’re here.”

“Good.” She folded her arms over her chest. “So spare me the stalling and tell me *why!”*

Sae leaned back in her seat, her arms crossed as well, a frown forming on her face. “I didn’t know they were going to beat him.”

“And what did you do to *stop* it?” Minako took a few steps forward until she made contact with Sae’s desk. Her daughter refused to meet her eyes. “He can’t even *walk* , Sae. He couldn’t even move around without hurting, or speak without coughing, or *breathe* because you let those men beat him half to death!”

She watched as Sae fumbled over something to say. Whether that meant she felt guilty or she was just intimidated by her, she couldn’t tell. Not yet anyway.

“What was I supposed to do?”

Her voice was quiet, but it ignited a spark in Minako. “You could have told them to stop.”

But that seemed to ignite something in Sae. “For your information, I *did* try and stop them! And do you know what they told me?” She threw herself to her feet, returning her glare with one of her own. Minako couldn’t tell if Sae had tears in her eyes because she was angry or feeling helpless. It made Minako’s heart crack.

“They told me I would lose my *job* .” One of her hands pounded against the desk. “That’s the *one thing* I have left! If I lose that, I will have *nothing!”*

Minako’s eyes narrowed. “He’s your father.”

Sae turned away with a scowl. “And where was *my* father when I had nowhere else to go? Where was *he* at when my back was against a wall and I needed help *years* ago?”

“He did nothing wrong, Sae, and you *knew* that before-,”

“He took *everything* away from me!”

She knew Sae would likely forever be upset with Akihiko, but this level of anger was unexpected. It was hard to keep her voice strong when she wanted to rewind time and hold Sae close to her and tell her everything was okay. She wanted to tell her that her father still loved her, that he never spoke bad about her, no matter the hardships she brought upon him with her hatred.

“I know you feel that way,” she said as she balled her fists up by her side. “But you’re not doing yourself any favors.”

Sae gave her another hard glare. “So you’re saying this is all *my* fault?”

She held her hands up to try and keep things calm. “He would do anything for you. If he knew these men had threatened you, he would have helped you. But you are so damn blinded by your rage and your hatred that you can’t even see when he reaches out a hand to save you.”

She fell back into her chair. “I don’t need his help.”

“Then you can’t hold any of this over his head.”

Sae fell quiet, but Minako knew better than to think that was the end. In fact, the longer Sae was silent, the more she started to worry that she was just too far gone at this point. She swallowed the lump building in her throat and tried one more time to reach her.

“Sae, you’re my daughter. I know you know better. I know you don’t hate him as much as you say you do. But this has to *stop* . You *have* to stand up for what’s *right* . Stop trying to use your anger as an excuse to do whatever you want.”

A few minutes later, Sae lifted her eyes and met hers. “It’s cute, how

badly you've underestimated your own *child* ."

Minako felt herself slowly losing steam. "You're better than this, Sae."

Sae only chuckled. "I have no need for a family that leaves me to the wolves." She pushed herself up on her feet again. Minako felt her heart break cleanly in two. "I don't need you. I don't need him. I've made it this far on my own. So don't you *ever* come in here and start lecturing *me* on right and wrong when you let that man *destroy* my life!"

Minako sighed heavily, closed her eyes to remain composed, then slowly nodded her head. "You destroyed it yourself, Sae."

It was the hardest thing in the world to walk away from her, but Minako had no choice. She managed to keep herself in check as she took the trains back home, but as soon as she closed the door behind her, she leaned back against it and released all the burning emotions at once.

Sae was gone. She wasn't the same child she had watched play with her sister.

She hadn't done enough for Sae, and now it was far too late to help her.

Was she going to have to give up on her? Was there still hope, or would she never see her daughter again, unless Sae stopped by to rub her nose in her regrets?

"M-Minako?"

She jumped in her spot, not thinking that Akihiko would have the energy or strength to be mobile. But even if he was in pain, even if he couldn't walk well, he still caught her before she hit the ground.

"W-What's wrong?" He at least sounded better. Or maybe she was just holding on to any small amount of hope she could at this point. "Where were you?"

She didn't say anything to him and held onto him for dear life. She

could finally understand the pain, the *agony* he had felt for years losing a child. But unlike him, she couldn't accept it and move on, or try and move on. It *hurt* . She thought someone ripped her heart right out of her chest. Sae was her *daughter* , the first little girl she ever had. She *loved* her, regardless of how upset she was with her. It was a parents' duty to steer their children down the right path. And for years, even after Sae screamed at Akihiko, Minako thought she would be okay…

And now she realized how wrong she had been.

Akihiko let her cry against him for a minute or so, but he soon grew too impatient and pushed her back at arms' length. "What happened?"

There was a bruise under his left eye, a bruise on his jaw, and he looked so tired. She felt the rest of the walls collapse around her. "I…I tried to talk to Sae…"

She literally felt Akihiko's sigh and his shoulders dropped with his breath. "Why?"

Minako was always the one on the fence, fighting between her children and Akihiko. Makoto made things so much easier to handle, but Sae was always the one that hurt. She loved them both, but she couldn't love them both and make a stand at the same time. Akihiko at least understood that, so he was always the one Minako took her anger out on. Because he let her. He didn't want her growing distant with Sae over something he did.

But this was different. And it made the pain that much harder to swallow.

"I…I wanted to know why she did this to you."

Akihiko gently pulled her back into him, but she swore she felt him cringe when she fell against his chest. She tried to lean back, but his hand kept her pressed against him. "Aren't you always the one who tells me it's just stress?"

She grabbed a fistful of his shirt. "She did *nothing* to help you."

“She tried to, but it didn’t stop them.”

That was when she pushed off of him, ignoring the way he hissed under his breath. “How? How can you say all of this after everything she’s done to you? This is taking things too far, Aki! She *knows* better!”

He stared back at her, eyes darkening with determination. “Because she’s my daughter.”

She buried her face in her hands. “She’s not herself anymore.”

Akihiko reached out and pulled her hands away from her face. He only spoke again when she met his eyes. “Then I will save her.”

There was something powerful in his voice, even if it was still raw from all of his coughing fits the night before. Even after being beaten and bruised, screamed at by his daughter for years, scorned by so many people for doing what was *right* , he *still* found the strength to fight. He still wanted that relationship with Sae, no matter how long he had to fight to get it back. He had done it for years, while she fell apart the second Sae snapped at her.

She felt his hands cradle her face and a new wave of tears came to her eyes. “I can’t give up on her. I *won’t* give up on her. As long as there is breath in my body, I will fight. It’s hard, I’ll admit that, but I know if I don’t give this my all before I die, I will regret it.”

Minako lifted her hands to cover his. “I just wish I knew what I could do to help you.”

He leaned into her and kissed her gently. “Just by being here, Minako, you give me the heart to push on.”

She tried to be as careful as she could as she threw her arms around his neck.

She would try and fight, if just to keep Akihiko fighting as well.

Chapter 95

Chapter 95

Makoto knew school was going to suck after an out of the country trip, but it was ten times worse than she imagined.

The talk of the school was the death of the principal. It was hard to differentiate between fact and fiction, knowing the student body, but she heard them all. The principal had been dabbing in drugs and got himself killed. He was poisoned. He was unhealthy, so he had a heart attack. The one that stood out the most to her was that someone had *shut him down* in front of the police station to keep him from ratting someone out…

But not one rumor detailed someone *beating* the hell out of the man. So how did Sae assume her dad had anything to do with his death?

She hadn't heard anything about her dad that night, and she couldn't ask her mother the next morning, since she had apparently gotten up before she did. Had Makoto not been in such a rush that morning, maybe she could have called her and found out if he was in jail or if he was on bail or if Sae had just been out of her mind and he had been released.

Her friends had all agreed they were going to meet up at Leblanc after school, but Makoto didn't know if she wanted to go. She didn't want to play this game anymore. Her mom had been right before. They were *children* . And now, they were in over their heads. The public seemed eager to see whom the Phantom Thieves would target next, and it was terrifying in its own way. With every new target, her family suffered. Sae grew more hostile and desperate. She hated to see what would happen after another one.

But she had tried to stop way back when she learned that Sae had a palace. Morgana had been the one who told her that they had a gift, so it would be a shame to waste it. Would that still hold true now? Or had the popularity started to change into pride and now it was too late to try and stop the others?

Phantom Thief business aside, she had work to do. How her council couldn't keep up with basic filing and paperwork was beyond her. It was like they had taken a vacation with her and figured she could do it all when she returned. She didn't even have much of a lunch break (not that she was really hungry) so she could talk to a few students about their anxiety over the death of the principal, their lack of dedication to school once they returned from Hawaii, or about how to study and apply for colleges.

She made herself available at the end of the school day for an hour, telling her friends that since she had been gone for almost a week, she had a lot to catch up on. She hoped it wasn't as off-putting as it sounded in her head, but she also really wanted time to wrap her own mind around her *own* problems.

Makoto was about to call it a day when the student council door slid open. Her heart dropped into her stomach when she caught Ren's smiling face. She hadn't seen him that day, and she may have suddenly remembered not texting him last night once she got home.

"Did you dream of me last night like I dreamt of you?"

Sadly, his charming antics weren't making her feel any better. "I'm sorry. The, um…jet lag had me in and out of sleep…last night, and I've been so busy trying to catch up and be there for some of the students who are worried about the principal's death and-,"

"What's wrong?"

Ren wore a sad smile, but his eyes were literally *begging* her to open up to him. But what she *hated* was always opening up to him about her family drama. It had to be annoying. "I'm just…really tired."

"So," he said quietly, shifting in his seat to get more comfortable. "Why don't we have a role reversal here? I will pretend that I'm you, Miss Super Awesome and Super Cute Student Council President and you can tell me anything."

She took a slow and deep inhale before releasing it. "I'm tired, Ren."

“Look, Makoto.” Her heart hurt when his face fell. “I know I’m not very good at this boyfriend role, but I just wanted you to know that you can talk to me like you did before. Even if I’m the one you’re upset with.”

The air around her tightened around her throat until she felt the tears burning in her eyes. “I-I just…I don’t want to bother you…with this stuff.”

He reached across the table and caught her hand before she could hide it under the table. “What’s wrong?”

She couldn’t deny him a second time. “M-My dad…he was arrested last night.” She tried to ignore the fact Ren dropped her hand. “My sister arrested him. About an hour after I came home. She said he *killed* someone, and that he may have killed the principal, too.”

There was a question on his tongue, she could tell, but he didn’t ask it. “I’m sure it’s just a huge misunderstanding, right?”

“He didn’t even fight back!” She pushed herself away from the table in a fury. “He *willingly* walked out with her! He told me to take care of my mom! He probably *did* kill someone!”

Ren held his hands up to try and keep her calm. “I don’t think he killed anyone. At least, not without a good reason.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Murder is murder, Ren.”

“Do you know what happened?”

“N-No…”

Ren sighed. “So maybe he didn’t kill anyone. Maybe he went willingly to try and not make a scene.”

She thought Ren had a point, and it was still hard for her to think about her dad killing someone, justifiable or not. “I-I’m sorry I didn’t…text you last night…”

She heard him laugh weakly. “I will admit I was a little worried, but then I saw you in the hallway this morning and I knew something

was wrong." He leaned into his hands resting on the table. His smile made her warm inside. "And it's my job as your *boyfriend* to keep you happy. So I was very determined to find you after school, since, you know, you were busy at lunch."

He pushed his chair back and stood, holding out his hand for her to do the same. "I know we all said we would meet today, but if you're not feeling up to it, I can inform you of what we talk about-,"

"I don't want to do this anymore."

Makoto threw a hand to her mouth as soon as the words were out. Ren seemed equally surprised. "You don't want to do what?"

When his surprise turned to concern, she figured she had to say something. "Changing…hearts. I don't want to do it anymore. Every time we change someone, my sister loses more of herself and she tries to tear my family apart." She shook her head to hide her tears. "I can't do it anymore. Please…"

Ren was quiet for several minutes, but she felt his hand on her shoulder before she heard his voice. "I can understand your concern, but if I can say this, I don't think stopping what we do is going to have any effect on your sister."

She met his eyes with as much determination as she could muster. "Then I have to change *her* heart."

At the moment, they didn't have an actual target. They were going to meet up to discuss one, possibly choosing someone named Okumura, since he had been mentioned back in Hawaii. But while she wanted to save her sister before she lost everyone that mattered to her, she knew she would have to tell the rest of them the truth about her family. And sadly, she didn't know if she had the heart for that.

She could ask the other group to go with her, so long as they didn't tell her dad.

"Let's…let's talk about this after the meeting today, alright?"

She didn't have the heart to argue with him, either. He helped her

gather her things at least, then he walked her down to the front of the school without a word. She really wanted to hold his hand, just to see if that made her feel better, like it sometimes did in the past.

Right as she opened her mouth to ask him if it was okay to hold him, she heard her name. But not in Ren's voice.

"Makoto Niijima."

Her blood turned cold when she saw one of the same cops that attacked her last time walk up to her. Ren was quick to stand between them. "Did you need something?"

The man wasn't half as presentable as he had been the first time. He literally pushed Ren to the side and grabbed her arm before she realized what was happening. She didn't have time to panic as he slammed her into the wall and threw handcuffs on her wrists. "I know you hated the principal! You probably killed him!"

She fought her restraints, but failed miserably. She heard Ren's voice again. "You can't do this. Let her go. Now."

The cop pulled on her wrists and she came face to face with Ren. He was angry. She had only seen him this angry in the Metaverse. "Do your worst, kid!"

"Hey, hey, hey now. What's going on here?"

Makoto and Ren both turned to find Ken walking down the stairs of the school and right up to the cop that held her. Ren was the one who answered him. "He's arresting her for something she didn't do!"

Ken grabbed his chin in thought, but Makoto found it odd that he seemed calm and relaxed when she was scared half to death. "Huh. Well, I'm assuming your sister will be here soon then, yes?"

That was when she felt the cop's hands loosen around her. "Her sister can't do anything."

But Ken only smiled. "Oh. Is that not the law? That before you can arrest a minor, a family member must be present?" He shrugged his shoulders. "I mean, I'm just a teacher, so I could be wrong."

She was released immediately. The handcuffs were left on her wrists, but she still came to stand next to Ren, who put himself back between her and the cop. No one said anything to anyone. The cop glared over to Ken, who seemed not to mind, but Ken also called out to the cop when he made a move to leave.

“Oh. So you’re *not* going to wait for her sister to get here?”

“Shut the fuck up.”

Ken shrugged his shoulders. Makoto and Ren spared each other a look. “I’ll let her know you stopped by then, so she can resolve this issue with you.”

Makoto breathed a sigh of relief when the cop scampered towards the station without another word. Ken slowly approached her. “Are you alright?”

Would he judge her if she started crying in front of him? “I-I…I’m okay…”

Ken nodded his head towards the school. “Let’s wait inside. I’m pretty sure your sister is gonna be *pissed* .”

“Please…please don’t tell her…” God she hated how weak she sounded. Ren at least was kind enough to pull out a spare lockpick and remove her handcuffs.

“Yeah…” Ken replied as he rubbed his head. “She kind of was the one who gave me the heads up to watch out for you. So I told her already.”

Makoto faltered at his words. Sae told someone to watch out for her? Why? After being brazen enough to have their father arrested, Makoto figured Sae wouldn’t care about any of them anymore…

Maybe there was still hope…

Without asking, Ren grabbed a hold of her hand as they walked towards Ken’s office. Ren sat next to her, never letting her go. Ken stood and paced around the room like he was nervous about something. Makoto took the opportunity to ask him if he knew

anything about her dad.

“Um. D-Do you know…if my dad is…is okay?”

Ken stopped pacing and turned to her slowly. “Yeah, he was released late last night.”

Makoto almost broke down and cried again. “Really?”

“Which is why I’m guessing your sister is worried someone will go after you.”

But… *why?* Who in the world had her dad killed (or not) that would make everyone come after her? Was her sister in trouble then, too? “But, she was the one who arrested him…”

Why didn’t anything make *sense?*

Ken fell into a seat as well. “Sadly, I don’t know much. Mitsuru was the one who called me and asked me to come help. Your sister called me much later and asked me to keep a close eye on you. I didn’t really ask questions.”

Something else popped into her head. “How do you know my sister?”

A smile came to his face. “You’re saying quite a bit in front of a *friend* , don’t ya think?”

Makoto felt her face burn instantly. Ren’s hand tightened over hers. “Pretty sure I could say the same to you, Sensei.”

Ken breathed out a laugh, but Makoto spoke up before he could. “It’s okay.” She turned to face Ren, hoping her blush was less prominent now. “Ken is a…family friend. He’s…he’s one of the ones I took into the Metaverse, if you didn’t already know.”

She then turned to the elder. “Ren knows about my family. He was the one who went with me to help save my dad…when…when he was attacked…”

Ken gave her a confused look, but he didn’t question her. “I spoke to

your sister once. I don't think it went well, but oddly enough, a few days later, she asked me to keep an eye on you since you seem to find yourself in a lot of trouble." He then grinned at her. "I'm sure both of them will be thrilled to find out you have a *boyfriend* ."

Ren's hand loosened and she felt her face burn again. The moment was short lived, thankfully, when they heard Ken's phone go off in his pocket. He held it up with a shake of his hand and a smirk on his face.

"No offense, Amamiya, but I would advise you to wait here. If you think Sanada is a terrifying guy, wait until you say something to her sister."

Ren didn't need another warning, so Makoto followed Ken out of the room after she told him she would see him in the morning. Ren likely wanted to protest, but she had turned her back so she couldn't hear it. The entire walk down the hall, Makoto's heart pounded painfully in her chest. What was Sae going to say to her? Was she angry? Was she scared? Was she going to arrest her instead?

It was an odd feeling, watching Sae turn in the lobby to greet her with a look of panic on her face. When she saw her, Makoto swore she felt tears in her eyes. "Sis?"

Sae's exhale was uncharacteristic of her, but it touched Makoto's heart nonetheless. She still cared. She was worried about her. Makoto had a very hard time not throwing her arms around her because Sae liked her personal space. But when Sae dropped her hands to her shoulders and lowered herself to her eye-level, she couldn't contain herself.

She cried even harder when she felt her sister's arms around her back. "Please tell me he didn't hurt you."

Makoto shook her head, hoping that was enough of an answer, because she couldn't find the words to speak.

"I don't mean to be *that* guy, but for the next few days, I think it would be wise to have someone take Makoto home from school."

Makoto leaned back and wiped her face. Sae still had her arms around her. It almost made her cry again. “And who am I going to trust with that? You can’t without drawing suspicion.”

“I will.”

Makoto literally froze in her place when Ren came out of the shadows. While she didn’t mind that he was willing, she didn’t really think she needed the escort, but he said it so confidently *in front of her sister!*

“Amamiya…”

She was impressed that Sae hadn’t murdered him yet. Ren was wise to keep his distance. “I mean, if that’s okay with you.” He then looked around the hall. “I’m sure your parents won’t mind.”

Makoto held her breath. She wanted to run across the hall and punch Ren in the face for bringing up her parents in front of Sae. She wanted to tell Sae it was okay, he didn’t mean anything by it, that he was just a really good friend and that was how he *knew* …

But minutes later, Sae did *nothing* . Ken continued to stand, confused as to what to say or do as well. Ren broke the silence with a sigh. “I promise I won’t let anything happen to her. If you want to test me for a day or two, I won’t mind. But I want to help.”

She felt Sae move next to her and Makoto prepared for the worst.

She got quite the opposite. “If she trusts you enough to tell you that much, then fine.” When Makoto blinked, Sae was standing in front of Ren, and her heart seized in her chest. “But if you fail to do that or you bring her harm, I will make sure you are locked in solitary confinement for the rest of your miserable life so you can regret this day until you *die* .”

“Sis!”

Ren held up a shaky hand. “I promise.” Then, he bowed to her. “You have my word, Niijima-san.”

It was the strangest thing to see. But yet, so heart-warming at the

same time. Sae quickly turned on her heels, but stopped next to where she was standing.

“Please, stay out of trouble, Makoto.”

She was glad Sae walked away before she could see her tears, *again* . Ren was the next one to come up to her. “You okay?”

“Wow, Amamiya. That was impressive!”

Makoto thought just as much. “It was dangerous, Ren.”

He only smiled at her. “Yeah, but, I think she likes me! That’s a good start, right?”

Ken laughed behind them. “Oh, don’t get too cocky. Makoto so much as suffers writer’s cramp, Sae’s gonna make you wish you were *dead!”*

Even with the seriousness of Ken’s words, even with the events of the last few hours, Makoto couldn’t stop the bubble of laughter from erupting from her throat.

When both men looked at her, she threw a hand to her mouth, embarrassed. However, Ren gave her that smile that melted her heart because he only showed it to *her* .

“That was beautiful.”

She thought her blush could have heated the entire school for an hour. “I-I um…s-sorry.”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it.” Ken came up behind Ren and dropped a hand on his shoulder. “I suggest you get her home safely tonight. And I hope you do that soon before I have to deal with one of her *parents* freaking out.”

Ren nodded his head.

But no matter what the outside world brought to her, Makoto knew she was safe with him.

Chapter 96

Chapter 96

The last time he had been in so much pain had been months ago, fighting off Kaneshiro's men and getting shot twice.

Akihiko was feeling better somewhat. It still hurt to move around, but he could manage. He didn't walk very well, which frustrated him, but he had overcome that obstacle once before. He could do it again. In a week, he would be back to normal.

Minako, however, liked to think differently. He felt bad, knowing she was only so hard on him because he *looked* like he was in pain. While most of his bruises were hidden behind clothing, she *knew* they were there. She couldn't lean against him like she always could without him wincing, even after telling her he would be fine. She couldn't poke at him, or really even *look* at him for long before she grimaced and turned away.

As the hours passed, he noticed her growing more and more agitated. Minako was hardly ever the quiet one. When something upset her, she let him know. But it got to the point that he had no choice but to come out and ask her when she began working on dinner an hour too early.

"Um. What's wrong?"

Her knife hit the cutting board with more force. "I'm angry."

He leaned his shoulder against the wall, trying not to sound nervous. "O-Okay?"

Minako continued to ignore him for a few seconds, but then she slammed her knife down and turned to him. "I keep telling myself there's no way I can help you. I can't help Sae. I can't make *both* of you happy." She paused to take a deep breath. "But I can. And I will. I just need Makoto to take me to that weird world of hers and I can talk some sense into Igor and demand my powers back!"

Akihiko certainly didn't expect her to bring up *that* . "W-What?"

"Sae isn't going to listen to *reason* anymore. I saw that. Makoto said she had a palace or whatever. If we can get rid of that, she'll return to normal!"

He held his hands up. "Minako, we don't know if that's true. That and we're so underprepared, and *you* won't be going either way."

The glare that came to her eyes made him swallow hard. "If you think I'm going to sit back and let you and Makoto rush off alone to save Sae, you've lost your damn mind."

"It's not safe-,"

"I don't *care!"*

Minako dropped her head to her chest with an angry sigh. "Aki, I can't keep being fake about this. Ever since Ren told me he could talk to Igor, I want to know what happened to me. I want my powers back. I *need* them back. I need them back more than ever now that I know it can save my daughter."

It was a dangerous topic. It made him very uncomfortable. He had no idea what Minako had gone through. He hated not staying with her through her coma. He hated not being with her when she woke up. He hated talking about the subject because he didn't know what to *say* .

"I'm sorry, Aki."

He cursed under his breath for being caught, but he shook his head to clear his mind. "No, it's fine. If this is something you really want, I have no right to stop you." She gave him a sad look and it forced him to look away from her. "But…I want to be there with you. I want to help you. If…if that's okay."

She chuckled at him and it cheered him right back up. "You're very sweet."

Then he threw out the thought that had been on his mind since he saw her tears that morning. "But Sae isn't a bad person." Minako's

eyes widened. “I mean, yeah, she’s slipping every so often, but she *defended* me yesterday. Despite every threat or pressure she has to endure, she still did the right thing. And that’s why I haven’t been pushing Mitsuru and our team to go back to her palace.”

Minako stared at him for the longest time, and he was unsure of whether she was angry with him or content with his words. A minute or two later, when he approached her, she blinked and seemed to realize what she had been doing.

“You can’t keep running away from her like this.”

Akihiko felt his heart sink in his chest. “I’m not running away.”

She shook her head, a frown coming to her lips. “This is the only way we can bring her back to her senses.”

“But would that make *her* happy?” Minako lifted her eyes to his at the harshness in his voice. “What if we go through with this? Where would that leave her? I don’t want my daughter to tell me she forgives me because that’s what *I* want! If we do whatever we need to do to *change* her, I’m *forcing* her to accept the hell I made her life!”

“She did most of this to herself.”

“Because I wasn’t *there* for her!”

Minako folded her arms with another glare. “So you’re okay living in this hell for the rest of your life? Because Sae will never forgive you otherwise. She will hate you until the day you die, and until the day *she* dies. And maybe you should remember that Sae isn’t just hurting *you* . How many more innocent people will Sae throw behind bars if we do *nothing?”*

She had a point, but he was starting to worry that maybe there was more behind the scenes at the office than he knew about. Sae did try and stop Kishita, but she didn’t do much. He had threatened her with something, but he had been too out of it to know what that was. So maybe it wasn’t Sae as much as it was the *system* . And how the hell did one change the heart of something that didn’t physically

have one?

“I’m home!”

Both Akihiko and Minako jumped at the sound of Makoto’s voice, then turned to look at the time. Minako sighed heavily, then turned around to focus on the task of making dinner. Akihiko couldn’t quite find the strength to move off the wall and Makoto peeked into the kitchen a minute later.

“Um, is…is everything okay?”

Akihiko nodded slowly, but Minako spoke before he could. “I want you to take me to the world you go to. Tomorrow. Or sometime this week.”

Makoto gave him a look, but he only groaned in response. “Minako, we just talked about this and-,”

“And you told me you would go with me.” She pushed herself back around again, another scowl on her face. “If I get my powers back, I’m going to help Sae. I don’t care if you come with me or not.”

Makoto spared each of them a hesitant look before she came to stand between the two of them. “Um, I…I don’t think Sae really needs help…r-right now…”

Minako sighed angrily. “She arrested your father, Makoto. Then let him get brutally *beaten* to the point he can’t even *walk!”*

“She *tried* to stop it…”

“But she *didn’t!”*

“But…” came Makoto’s quiet voice. She lowered her head, clearly embarrassed about speaking up in their argument, but she at least powered on through. “I saw it today. I saw her act like how I used to remember her.”

That caught his attention. “You saw her today?”

Makoto must have realized that she didn’t *mean* to say that out loud,

or in his presence, because she turned away from him. “U-Uh…”

“Makoto.”

She inhaled deeply. “One of those guys from before tried to arrest me today.” Akihiko and Minako both gasped. “But I guess Sis told Ken to keep an eye on me, because he came and kicked the guy away. Then Sis showed up and she was kind and happy to know I was okay.”

Hearing her words took the air right out of his lungs. It was such a relief knowing that Sae was still acting like a good sister. He had worried at one point that her hatred for him would ruin her relationship with Makoto, but it wasn’t. At least, not now. Hopefully not ever.

“Fine.”

When Minako returned to her vegetables, Makoto glanced over at him. He tried to give her a smile, as weak as it was. “I’m glad she still looks out for you.”

Makoto slowly nodded once, then spared her mother a look before she walked back into the living room. Akihiko took a few painful steps towards Minako, then grabbed her wrist from behind since she hadn’t moved in seconds.

“I know you’re upset. But let’s take this one step at a time.” He felt her release the knife in her hand and he carefully stepped up behind her, wrapping his arms around her stomach. “Mitsuru wants to know more about the Metaverse. She won’t be happy knowing I’m taking you, but I know you want your answers. So we can all go together.”

In her silence, he mustered a weak laugh. “I mean, after all, one round of fighting wore me out last time. We need to practice a lot more before we charge into a serious battle.”

When he felt her stirring in his arms, he panicked. Maybe he should have just kept his mouth shut. “Sometimes, I really just want to punch you.”

He didn’t know if she was serious or not. “Oh.”

But she turned around and faced him with a small smile. His heart relaxed and he smiled, too. “It might be kind of fun, roaming around a dangerous place again with all our friends.”

He pulled her into him. “So long as you don’t charge off because you see something that looks like treasure.”

She laughed against him. “So long as *you* don’t charge off because you see something that looks *really strong.”*

Minako pushed him away from her, and had he not taken a step back prior, he likely would have fallen over. Instead of an apology, she beamed at him and returned to preparing dinner. He sighed with a small laugh, then he figured he should get some rest for now.

As soon as he sat down on the couch, his phone buzzed in his pocket. Slightly annoyed, he pulled it out and immediately perked up.

Come buy me a drink baby!

It was from Ohya.

She was supposed to contact him when she found information about his partner. He didn’t know how he felt about walking in public, but if this helped him find some kind of headway in this mess, he had to. He couldn’t let a small injury keep him from finding out the *truth* .

Explaining that to Minako, however, wouldn’t be easy.

“I, uh…I need to meet someone…”

He leaned against the wall for support as Minako slowly turned to face him. “Meet *someone?”*

“Um.” He rubbed the back of his head. She lifted an eyebrow, already knowing he was stalling. “Someone has information on something I’m working on. I need to speak to them.”

Minako stared back at him for a long second, then she sighed. “I wish you would stop being so secretive.”

His phone buzzed again. He ignored it. “Someone has information about my partner and his death.” She locked eyes with him in surprise. “I know it’s not quite the same thing, but I want answers about what happened to him just like you want answers about what happened to you.”

Her shoulders dropped in defeat. “You’re hurt.”

“I’ll be fine.”

She didn’t say anything in response, so Akihiko took the moment he had and headed for the door. It actually felt nice stepping outside after a full day being locked inside. The more he walked around, the more he got used to the second glances at people passing by. His knee stopped burning after a while. The cooler air did wonders for his lungs and his mind. He wouldn’t say he was at *peace* , but he was focused and ready. He was *so close* to the truth. He knew it.

Akihiko at least texted Minako a quick *I made it* because that was what she had asked of him after he was shot. When he opened the door to the bar, both Lala and Ohya gave him a confused look as he planted himself on the bar stool next to the reporter.

“Yeah, I got beat up. Stop staring.”

Ohya thought it was funny and started laughing. Lala shook her head. “Maybe you *are* getting too old.”

Ohya laughed harder.

“Anyway,” he started, hoping to calm the hysterical woman next to him. “You have something for me?”

She waved her hand and wiped at her eyes. “And I don’t see a drink in front of me.”

He nodded to Lala, who proceeded to fill the empty glass with whatever liquor Ohya enjoyed so much. “Now. Tell me what you learned.”

Ohya took a sip of her drink and glared at him over the rim of her glass. “Whoever beat you up should have beat you up more for

thinking you could treat a lady like this."

"Now, now, Ohya," Lala intervened. "Be nice. He's your *elder* ."

He shot the bartender a look, then turned his attention back to Ohya. "Will you please tell me what you learned?"

The glass hit the counter and she leaned into her palm. He started to grow nervous when she grinned at him. "Your partner was a pretty good undercover person from what I learned."

Did that make him a bad guy then? "O-Okay?"

She slid him a file. "Kayo had a reputation for mislabeling her files so if something did happen to her, people would get very confused. The files about Shido are either non-existent or missing. *This* , however, might make you happy."

Anxiously, he flipped open the folder and started reading the first page. Nothing all that exciting caught his attention, so he turned back to Ohya. "Mind explaining what this has to do with Tatsu?"

She tapped her chin, but her eyes never left his. Neither did her grin. "Your friend was doing some serious investigating of his own. Caught Kayo's attention. Those files are actually his. He probably shared them with her is my guess, but when he 'died', she sort of went all out on those people."

He was so confused, but he continued to flip through the file, hoping something would clear it all up. "I don't even know some of these people."

"No?" She chuckled and reached for her drink. "Some cop *you* are then."

He tried not to feel wounded at the insult.

"Some of those people are dead. Odd deaths. Some of those people are missing. Some of those people are the ones who *benefitted* from said people falling off the earth."

Akihiko finally started to see names he recognized. The police

commissioner. The SIU director. A few politicians he had met once in his life. Sadly for him, Shido's name didn't come up, so if he had a connection to anything, it wasn't documented.

But then he saw another name.

Goro Akechi.

"Why is Akechi in here?"

Ohya shrugged her shoulders and set her drink down. "I have no idea. Arrogant little bastard, sure, but how your friend or my friend thought a child had anything to do with this fiasco is beyond me."

It didn't make sense. Sure he was washy about Akechi to begin with, but he was a *child* when his partner was killed. Makoto was thirteen. How in the world would a kid that age find themselves in a mess like this?

He said as much to Ohya. "If Tatsu had his eyes on Akechi, he would have been fourteen at the oldest. Why would he have been interested in him?"

She took another drink. "Kayo didn't half ass anything. I'm sure your partner didn't either. The only thing I really remember about it is that a few people died from weird heart attacks and Akechi magically starts to become popular. How the hell did someone with *nothing* become a star without doing *something?"*

Akihiko slammed his fist against the counter. "Are you seriously trying to tell me you think a *child* became famous because he earned it by killing someone?"

Ohya didn't answer.

She didn't have to.

He suddenly felt extremely sick.

He knew the Phantom Thieves couldn't be the ones behind the mental shutdowns. The first one happened years ago. It happened long before Amamiya was transferred to the city, and he was the

one who seemed to be the leader since he was involved with every case. And as much as he tried to fight the numbing in the back of his head, he couldn't drown out the realization once it struck him.

The voice that called out to him before he shot at him.

It was his.

But *why?*

Akihiko couldn't believe Akechi would want to *kill* him. And he was sure the black mask guy worked for Shido. How would Akechi know Shido? And how would Akechi have gained his powers without drawing Mitsuru's attention?

…Or, did *Isshiki* find out and *that* was why she was killed?

Was his *partner* killed because he was getting too close to figure out the truth?

That was why people wanted him dead.

He was getting close, too.

Akihiko grabbed the file from the counter and pushed his chair back. "Thank you. Hopefully I can live long enough to see this to an end."

Ohya laughed and Lala poured her another drink. "Might wanna find an apprentice who won't croak on the job!"

He ignored her and walked out of the bar. He had to ask Makoto what she thought of Akechi. He had to know why she had been speaking to him all those months ago. He needed to *know* if there was even a *possibility* that Akechi was a *bad* person. Akihiko never felt great around him, but never in a million years would he have pegged him as a cold blooded *killer* .

Akihiko hadn't been out for too terribly long. When he returned back to the apartment, Minako and Makoto were cleaning up after dinner. He was half tempted to ask where his meal was, but he wasn't really

all that hungry. At least, he might be able to eat once he got some more direction from Makoto about whether Akechi was a killer or just a scapegoat for his unease.

“Can I…Can I ask you something, Makoto?”

Minako was the first one to acknowledge him. “Oh? Boring date, I see.”

He sighed deeply, but then Makoto shyly walked around her mother to stand before him. “I-I guess?”

“Akechi…” Hell, he didn’t think he could go through with this. But Makoto took a confused step forward, and he knew he had no choice but to finish his thought. “Do you like him?”

Makoto recoiled like he had slapped her, to which Minako chuckled from behind her. “W-What? W-Where did you hear *that?”*

Akihiko ran a hand over his face. “That’s not what I meant. I mean, is he your friend? Would you trust him? That sort of thing.”

“O-Oh…” He gave her a second to compose herself, then she lowered her eyes to the floor. “I-I don’t know. He’s more annoying than anything, but I’m not afraid of him.”

He was going to leave it at that, but then Makoto added, “Ren told me not to trust him. I don’t know why, but ever since, Akechi has been a little… *off* .”

“W-What does that mean?”

She grabbed at her opposite arm. “I don’t know. But Ren gets along well with most people. If he tells me not to trust someone, I…I kind of feel like they’re a bad person.”

He swallowed the lump building in his throat. “Do you think he’s a bad person?”

Makoto was silent for a second. “I…I don’t know.”

“What were you talking with him about the day I caught you in

Kasumigaseki?”

“Um…” Akihiko struggled to wait for an answer, but it had been a few weeks. But he grew more and more uncomfortable in her silence. “He tries to pick my brain about the Phantom Thieves. He’s done it several times. But…I don’t know…he usually starts by talking about you, or Sis…and it kind of…makes me stumble a little.”

Whether or not Akechi knew that Sae and Makoto were his daughters, he didn’t know. He probably did. He was much smarter than Akihiko gave him credit for. Akechi had been picking his brain about the Phantom Thieves, about their future intentions to target *Sae* , and he never understood why…

Was he looking for a weakness? Since he hadn’t been able to kill him the first time?

“Just…be careful around him, okay?”

Makoto gave him a look, but she didn’t argue with him and nodded her head. Akihiko fell to the couch, gripping at the file in his hand. Would Akechi try and go after either of his kids? And why? Why in the world would Akechi act so normal around him at work, go as far as sticking up for him, only to try and kill him when his back was turned?

Nothing made sense. But when did it ever?

“Um, can I…tell you something?”

Minako came to sit down next to him, but he was immediately concerned when she gripped at her hands with nervousness. He watched her for a few seconds, but she only grew more worrisome and more on edge. He reached out to grab her hands, to which she leaned her head back and exhaled deeply.

“I spoke to him, a while back…”

Akihiko had not been ready for that. “Y-You spoke to Akechi?”

She nodded once. “I didn’t mean to. I just wanted to see Sae. I wanted to know for myself how she had been, if she was really

losing her mind, or if everything had painted her in a different light."

"O-Okay?" He turned himself to face her more comfortably. "When was this?"

"Right before Makoto went on her trip."

He felt her hands tighten under his. "Why did you talk to Akechi?"

She sighed heavily. "I didn't want to. I just thought I needed a backstory in case someone asked me why I was wandering around the courthouse. Akechi just happened to be that someone…"

Something heavy landed in his stomach. "What was your backstory?"

Minako didn't answer right away. He thought the silence was going to crush him. "I…I told him about what happened…to you."

It didn't really clear anything up. "About what?"

"When you were suffering and Ren and Makoto went to that world to save you."

He was pretty sure he stopped breathing. "W-What? Why? Why would you tell him that?"

She pulled her hands out from under his and gripped at the edge of her shirt. "I know Sae is the one who's in charge of those cases. So I figured that would be my story. But she wasn't there when I went in, and I tried to stall, I really did, but I couldn't…and I didn't think about him being *bad* . He's a kid. And I thought my story would have gone way over his head."

Akihiko sighed into his hands. "Did you tell him it happened to *me?"*

Again, Minako's silence did nothing for his churning stomach. "I…I said it happened to…my husband."

It could have been worse. She could have told him his name. But if Akechi really was the masked man, she didn't have to. Which meant that Minako just gave herself away to a person who was more

dangerous than he wanted to believe. If that was the case.

He pushed himself up to his feet, then turned back to Minako. He felt his heart crack when she looked up at him with sad eyes. “I…I’m not mad…But from now on, promise me you’ll stay away from him. I don’t know enough yet to say anything, and I don’t want to think he’s dangerous, but I want to be safe. So promise me.”

She nodded her head and he saw her grip relax. The sad look did not go away. “I’m sorry, Aki.”

“Minako.” He waited until she looked back up at him. “Promise me you’ll stay away from him.”

“I-I promise…”

He was about to head off into his room to ask for help, but the sorrow in Minako’s voice literally crushed him. He sat down next to her again and she stiffened when he put an arm around her shoulders. “I’m not mad. If he figures it out, good for him. But I just want you to be careful in case he’s up to something with this information.”

She said nothing more to him as she leaned against his chest. He pulled out his phone from his pocket and pulled up Fuuka’s contact information. It took him a solid ten minutes to type out a text. He needed answers. And now, he needed them *fast* . If his family was under the eyes of Akechi and he was not the innocent little teenage brat Akihiko assumed he was, he would like to know.

I need information on a Goro Akechi. Everything. Please.

Fuuka’s reply was immediate. *I’ll look into him. Is there any reason why him?*

He tried to shield his response from Minako to keep her from panicking in case the lead came back empty.

I think he’s the one behind the mental shutdowns.

Chapter 97

Chapter 97

He finally, *finally* got his chance to speak to Igor in his dreams.

Ren listened to the usual spiel. He was *close* to that climatic moment in this *adventure* . He was happy with his progress. He needed to be careful of who he trusted.

As soon as the weird old man was about to send him off, he grabbed at the bars of his cell. “I want to ask you something.”

Caroline, unsurprisingly, smacked her baton against the bars. “You watch your tone, Inmate!”

He ignored her. “Do you know a Minako Arisato?”

Igor went still, which made Ren’s grip tighten. The twins were quiet for once. This was a good sign, right?

“I’ve never heard that name.”

Liar . “She was a wild card before me. She said she knew you. And your attendant, someone named Theo.”

When Igor narrowed his eyes over his hands, Ren worried that maybe he shouldn’t have asked. But why would Igor be angry? Had Minako lost her powers because he didn’t like her for some reason? He found that *extremely* hard to believe.

“T-Theo…”

He had not expected to get a reaction from the twins. “Why does that sound so familiar?”

He could have sworn Igor growled at him. “If the answer was meant to come to you, it shall be so. Continue to prove your worth to the gods of fate. That should be your main focus, boy.”

Ren sat up the next second, struggling to catch his breath on the bed. Morgana perked up quickly, coming to stand by his side. “Are you okay?”

He wiped at his brow, then fell back to his pillow. “I went to talk to Igor. I think he kind of kicked me out. He’s never done that before.”

Morgana sat next to him, his blue eyes narrowing in confusion. “Doesn’t he always kick you out?”

“Kind of.” He took a slow inhale and released it just as slowly. “But when I asked him about Minako, I think he got *mad* .”

“Mad?”

Ren dropped an arm over his eyes. “I don’t know. It was weird. Maybe they are two different people. Maybe her Igor isn’t the same one. But…he reacted to her name. Like he knew her, and didn’t like her, and then kicked me out.”

Morgana stretched out his back with a yawn. “You have some weird friends.”

But as the conversation died, his mind did not. The twins might have known who this Theo was. And if that was true, then it *had* to be the same Igor. So why did he not want him to *know?* Was he going to suffer the same fate at the end of his game? Was this kind of power only allowed to be on the planet at one time? How many other wild cards had there been since Minako lost her powers? And why couldn’t she remember? How was he going to tell her he tried to talk to Igor, but learned *nothing?*

Well, maybe not. Maybe his reaction was an answer…

He really needed to sleep.

Just when he thought he was able to drift off, his alarm jerked him awake. He groaned loudly, annoyed at having to be up *already* , but he went about his morning routine without even knowing what he was doing. Sojiro was nice enough to have a stronger blend ready for him, a test trial, he called it, and Ren was more than happy to drink it.

“I wish I knew how to thank you for all you’ve done for Futaba,” he said as Ren was almost out the door. He didn’t comment back, worried that Sojiro hadn’t meant for him to hear it, so he continued on to school like he hadn’t.

He wasn’t terribly late, but he was running behind his normal schedule. Most of his weariness and fatigue faded away when he caught Makoto standing by the front gate. Waiting for him? Probably not. But that’s what he told himself as he threw on his best smile.

“Aw, you’re waiting for me?”

That precious little blush covered her face, but she lowered her head and pressed her hands against her skirt. “A-Actually, yes. I was.”

Ren would have found it adorable had there not been an underlying message in her tone. “Something wrong?”

There were a few snide remarks from passing students about him corrupting the most innocent person in the school, and a part of him worried that maybe that was where her nervousness was coming from. But she pointed her head over to the side and he followed her to the small alcove by the vending machines. She still said nothing to him when she put in a few coins and bought some (nasty) coffee. He took the moment to lighten the mood.

“If you want *good* coffee, I should make you a cup when we have our meeting.”

Instead, she handed it to him. “You look tired.”

He *almost* started gushing about how thoughtful she had been. He couldn’t contain his laugh. “You’re so sweet, Makoto.”

When he took the can from her hand, she sighed and dropped her eyes again. His heart started to hurt. “Um. So…can I ask you a strange question?”

Well, it was better than being unable to handle the gossip of her peers and throwing him to the curb. Hopefully. “Sure.”

“Why do you not trust Akechi?”

Ren was so confused as to why she brought him up that he had to ask her to repeat her question. It still didn't make any sense a second time. "Why are you asking?"

She rubbed her forearm with her opposite hand. "Well, my dad asked me…last night."

Odd. "Why is your dad interested in Akechi? Don't they work together?"

"I just want to know why you can't trust him."

He felt Morgana wiggle around in his bag, so Ren decided not to keep the questions going. "Well, he heard Morgana's voice back when we were all at the TV station together. It means he's been to the Metaverse, but so have your friends."

"But you trust my dad, right?"

Ren placed his free hand into his pocket. "I mean, yeah. I do. But I don't want to give you the impression that he's good or bad until I can actually prove it one way or another."

Makoto settled for a nod of her head. "I understand. We should probably head to class."

He wasn't okay leaving the conversation on a sad note, but holding Makoto up for classes was a big no-no in his book. He walked beside her, hoping to ease any of her concerns with his presence.

"Don't worry, Makoto," he whispered with a smile. "I'll protect you."

He was rewarded with a small smile and a blush. He considered it a good way to start his morning.

School itself was fairly boring. He usually managed to stay awake during class because his phone would go off constantly, but today, no one said anything. It was weird. Ryuji would have texted him a hundred times before the last bell, but he had said nothing. Ann didn't really seem like herself either. He at least knew why Makoto was acting the way she was.

The meeting after school opened his eyes to everything.

“Dude, I don’t think we should keep doin’ this…”

Ren gave Ryuji a blank stare, but Ryuji wasn’t the only one with the same thought. Ann *and* Yusuke both voiced their unease about continuing on. Futaba was new, so while she didn’t offer her opinion, he figured she was just going to keep quiet.

“C’mon, guys. There’s still so many more people we can help!”

Ryuji sighed and hung his head. “Yeah, but…I just don’t wanna get more people in trouble, ya know?”

Morgana practically hissed at the teen. “We have so many people relying on us, and *now* you want to quit?”

Ren knew Morgana had been pretty upset when he was left behind for their trip, but he didn’t know *how* upset he had been until now. Was Futaba not that great a caretaker? Then why did he favor her over him?

“This popularity is a bit…overbearing.”

“…I agree with Yusuke…”

Morgana jumped up from Futaba’s lab and growled. It was a strange sound to hear. “You’re all cowards!”

“Morgana, stop.”

But the cat’s words struck a chord in Ryuji. The blond threw his chair back and pounded the table. “There’s good people out there takin’ the blame for what *we’re* doin’! Maybe some of you can live with that guilt, but I sure as hell can’t!”

Ren shot a glance to Makoto, but her eyes were down to her lap. Did Ryuji know about what happened to Sanada? Is that why he was so adamant to *stop?* Makoto had done very much the same when she told him about it…

Morgana just had to keep poking the fire. “You’re concerned about

one or two people when there's hundreds and millions of good ones out there suffering and we can help them!"

Makoto was quick enough to grab Ryuji's arm before he strangled Morgana, or Morgana retaliated with his claws. "This is enough."

When the silence became too much for him, Ren cleared his throat. "I think we should take a day or two off. Just so we can calm down and-,"

"Then I'll do this on my own."

Morgana hopped off the table and was by the stairs before Ren even realized what he had said. "What?"

Morgana turned and glared at all of them. "I don't want to work with a bunch of people who abandon me and then lose heart in the cause we all set out to accomplish together."

Ren almost stood up, but a hand stopped him. "Let him go. Nothing you say to him now will make things better."

He knew Makoto was right, but they didn't *abandon* Morgana. True, it was the first time the cat was alone since they had rescued him in Kamoshida's palace, but there was no way they could smuggle a cat on a plane and a hotel without getting busted. He thought he made that clear to Morgana that night…

"Do you…do you think he'll come back…for food at least?"

Ren turned to face Futaba, who had her face against her knees and a frown on her face. "He just needs to take a walk. He'll be back for dinner." He shot her a smile to hopefully ease her worries. "I've spoiled him. So don't worry."

Futaba gave him a small smile in return, even while Ren had to prepare himself in case Morgana's pride was too wounded and he really didn't come back…

"I ain't sorry man," Ryuji said as he kicked at something on the ground. "Sanada got his ass handed to him because everybody thinks he's one of us."

He gave Makoto another look, but she didn't notice. "How do you know this?"

Ryuji slammed his fist into his palm. "My mom told me! She works with another cop's wife. And I'm tired of him takin' the fall for my shit! The only person who ever gave a damn about me and *this* is how the world treats him!"

Ren noticed Makoto hold her hands together and he figured she wanted to say just as much, but couldn't.

"Um…c-can I say…something?"

He felt bad for Futaba, being somewhat new and now intimidated by Ryuji's apparent harshness. "It's okay, Futaba." Ann was kind enough to sit next to her. "You can say whatever you want."

The younger girl nodded, then said, "I think we should still investigate our lead. F-For now…"

Right.

Futaba had done some searching and found a possible new target while they were on their trip. Mishima had also shown him the high demand for the team to change the heart of one Kunikazu Okumura. Ren found it odd that there were so many people calling him out specifically, which led to the recent breakdown of their team…

Once they all agreed to that much, Futaba was quick to jump onto her computer and get to work. Ren figured it would be best to leave it at that, and reconvene when Morgana returned so they could work out a plan. Ryuji was the first one to mumble something and head for the stairs. Ann gave him a look, told him to give him some space, then followed behind him.

"I truly worry that we've bit off more than we can chew."

Ren could only sigh. "Maybe…"

Yusuke left as soon as Ren handed him some coins so the boy could get home. Makoto helped to clear up his room a little, and had Futaba not been so diligent in her search, he would have stopped

her from leaving.

“Get home safe.”

She gave him a smile that warmed him. “Get some sleep tonight, Ren.”

Given the events of the past few minutes, he felt he could do just that based off her smile and words alone.

“So. Girlfriend? Yes? No?”

Ren *may* have temporarily forgotten Futaba was still in the room. She narrowed her eyes at him over the edge of the computer on her lap, but Ren chose to turn and finish putting things away.

“Dad’s gonna kill ya. Been nice knowing ya.”

He put one of the folded up chairs against a wall. “He seems to have taken a liking to you.”

Futaba returned to her computer. “Meh. He’s cool. He doesn’t understand tech stuff. That insulted me.”

Ren had to laugh at that. “Not everyone can be as talented as you are.”

She continued to type away at an ungodly speed on her computer while he returned to cleaning up. While Futaba was in the room with him, he strangely missed Morgana. The cat had a tendency to get on his nerves from time to time, but Ren didn’t know how empty the room would be without him. Maybe he should try and find him. With all the crazy events happening, Morgana could easily disappear and he may never find him again. Or worse yet, he would get caught in a trap and need help, but they would have no idea where he was.

“So. This guy’s a meanie. We should go after him. Maybe Mona did.”

Ren finished up the last of the fixing up and came to sit a safe distance away from Futaba. He would never understand how she could type so fast without making mistakes or going stir crazy. “I

don’t think Morgana would tackle someone like that by himself.”

Hopefully.

Futaba turned her computer so he could see. It appeared like a simple profile of the man. “People say he’s abusive. He treats his employees bad. The food is gross anyway.”

Right. While they had been in Hawaii, they had seen a newly built (but not yet open) Big Bang Burger. That night had been when Mishima told them that Okumura, the owner of the chain, wanted to “take over” the industry. It wasn’t until they returned that he learned of the conditions of the workers. But what other corporate CEO didn’t act like that? Why was *he* the bad guy and not some of the managers?

Ren assumed his hands weren’t *clean* , but…

“But we’re not the only group of people investigating him.”

Ren gave her a look from where he sat. “No?”

A more somber expression came to her face. She scooted closer to him and signaled for him to lean in. He had no idea why she needed to be so secretive when it was just the two of them, but he didn’t question her.

“Makoto’s sister has a file on him.”

Her news felt like a punch to the gut. “W-Why? How would you know that?”

Futaba appeared insulted. “This is what I do best. Plus, I don’t like not knowing my enemy. She’s mean to Sojiro.”

He was very uncomfortable with the change in topics. “Why didn’t you say anything when Makoto was here?”

“I didn’t want her to be mad.”

Granted, now that she had said as much, Ren felt the same. “Okay, so why is she looking into Okumura?”

Futaba pointed to her screen. “She’s really good at her job.” Ren tried to think that was a *good* thing. “Money laundering. Scandals. Friends with criminal backgrounds. Lots of stuff he should have been arrested for, but nope. Never.”

Ren was starting to believe every single bigwig or politician would *never* be touchable. Did that mean since Sae couldn’t do anything with whatever proof she had, that this was meant to be a job for his team? After all, how long had Kaneshiro been around and no one had put a stop to him?

“He does make a great candidate then, doesn’t he?”

Futaba nodded sharply with a growing grin. “And you know what else?” She never gave him a chance to answer. “I bet if he gets a change of heart, he will confess to his crimes and those who work with him will be headin’ to jail too!”

He never expected Futaba to find joy in bringing down bad guys. It was cute though. “Well, maybe we should take a walk and see if we can share our intel with Morgana.”

Futaba put her laptop in the empty space next to her and they both stood up and walked down the stairs. Sojiro studied him for a second *too* long, but he never said anything to him. Futaba ran up to Sojiro, exchanged some words, then the older man’s glare landed on him.

“Going out to look for a lost cat?”

Ren worried that maybe that wasn’t a good enough excuse to take Futaba outside. But Futaba walked back up to him, grabbed his arm, and pulled him towards the door. It was odd for her to be so gung-ho about the outdoors, but maybe she was more concerned about finding Morgana. He could respect that. He would like to know where his feline companion had disappeared to as well.

They didn’t make it too far down the alley when a group turned the corner. Futaba immediately ran behind him, but as soon as Ren noticed the faces, he grew less apprehensive.

“Looking for something?”

Sanada was with his lady friend and a new face. Ren didn’t want to seem rude and ignore them, so he lightly bowed his head. “Um, we’re looking for my cat.”

“The black one?”

Futaba’s hand tightened around his arm. “Mona!”

It would never cease to amaze him how much Sanada’s tone and temperament changed when dealing with someone that was *not* him. “Ah. Can’t say we’ve seen this…Mona around here.”

“You must be Futaba!”

The other woman slowly came in front of her friends. She had a nice smile and seemed the most friendly out of her group. “My name is Fuuka. I had heard that you’re a big tech person, like me!”

Ren felt Futaba lean over more to get a better look. “Yeah?”

Her smile grew. “Oh yes. I actually like to build my own software and computers! I know I probably shouldn’t admit this with a *cop* here, but…” She took a few steps closer. Ren was impressed Futaba didn’t take off running. “I like to hack into things, too.”

He could *feel* Futaba’s energy levels growing. “Really?”

Ren, however, grew slightly unnerved. While it was great that Futaba was in the midst of making another “friend”, he couldn’t really be comfortable with a *hacker* friend. This Fuuka seemed nice enough at least. And if she was on a “team” with Sanada, then he could trust her.

“Akihiko still needs to take me to Akihabara!” Fuuka’s eyes were literally stars. “I hear they have so much to see!”

Futaba looked exactly the same. “Yes, yes, and *yes!* ”

Ren chose to step away from the excitement, but by doing so, he had no choice but to step closer to the more *menacing* part of the

group. “So. What brings you guys back?”

Mitsuru, or at least he thought that was who she was, smirked at him. “Are we not allowed to stop by for coffee?”

Sanada, like usual, got right to the point. “Why don’t you trust Akechi?”

Ren sighed heavily, placing his hands into his pockets. “I can’t say for sure yet. He just heard Morgana’s voice several months ago, and that struck me as odd. But then you and Amada heard it too, so I figured it was a coincidence.”

“Let me approach this differently,” Sanada added, taking one more step closer to him. “Would you trust him with your life?”

Ren couldn’t help but narrow his eyes. “What is this about?”

“Yes or no.”

He waited a moment, but he didn’t last too long under the stares of two *very* intimidating people. “No.”

But before either of them could walk away, Ren reached out and stopped them. “Look. I don’t trust him. But that’s not really enough for me to tell you he’s bad or good. So, I don’t want him to get in trouble or anything.”

Sanada was quiet, but Mitsuru broke the heavy silence. “It would be wise for you to know that we have him under investigation.”

“Mitsuru…”

Ren could only stare back in shock. *Akechi?* The same popular detective that won the hearts of the public until the Phantom Thieves became popular? How? And why? Granted he didn’t know much about the other group of persona users, but Sanada was a good guy. He was a good *cop* . If he was warning them about Akechi, Ren knew it had to be true.

If only he could find some sort of Akechi repellant for him and his team...

“Everything is speculation right now.” Ren finally snapped to attention hearing Sanada’s voice. “But…just be careful around him, alright?”

He suddenly wanted to walk back up the stairs, crawl into bed, and never wake up.

Chapter 98

Chapter 98

Minako was beginning to lose her patience.

She wanted to help Sae. She was *obligated* to help her. But she couldn't. Not with words, anyway. No matter what Makoto or Akihiko told her, Sae *wasn't* the same. Akihiko had learned to deal with it over the years. But ever since Makoto had informed them of a way to help, it was all Minako could think about.

Which led her to her second issue: her lack of powers.

She didn't want to harass Ren to know if he had even spoken to Igor or if he had forgotten by chance. He was a busy teenager, and this was a very selfish request. She would like to think that if he had heard something, he would have told her. But the days had turned to weeks and she *needed* to know, if just for her own sanity.

Plus, if she could get them back, she could help Sae, and maybe then everything would return to normal. It also did her no good that while she waited for answers, she started spinning stories of her own.

Akechi couldn't have been a good guy. And if he wasn't a good guy, he might be trying to hurt Sae. Akechi had presented himself nicely enough, but he did seem very drawn into her story, knowing what she was talking about, almost like…

Like *he* had been there…

Was that why Akihiko was demanding both her and Makoto to stay away from him? Because he *knew?*

But…what did that mean for Sae? If Akechi did attack Akihiko, couldn't he go after Sae?

Over my dead body.

She had her chance. Tomorrow was Sunday. Makoto wouldn't have school. Akihiko hadn't been to work since he was arrested. She *had* to talk to Igor herself. Which meant she *had* to travel to this world. She would feel more comfortable with Makoto, knowing she knew her way around much better than Akihiko did, but if she truly had lost her powers and some monster attacked, she wanted back-up.

If Akihiko wouldn't do it, maybe Yukari would. Aigis would with no questions asked, but she was watching Sae. Junpei might. Ken might. Mitsuru probably wanted to go and see for herself if Minako could reach the Velvet Room on her own.

If no one would go with her, she would go by herself.

Makoto was home before Akihiko was, which was to be expected, and Minako tried not to sound too desperate as she asked her question. "Will you take me to the Metaverse tomorrow?"

Her daughter's eyes met hers, but not for long. "W-Why?"

"Because I want my powers back." She left out the part of wanting to help Sae, because Makoto should already know *why* she wanted them back. "And I know your dad well enough to know he's not well enough to do much."

Makoto looked at her phone, as if the device would have the answer she needed. Minako didn't want to push her, and if she was worried about making the trip without her friends, well, then they could go, too. Ren might be more helpful anyway. She really didn't want to have to force people to fight. She thought that the Velvet Room door was before all the fighting, but maybe the Metaverse was different?

"Are you…are you going to tell Dad?"

Makoto's voice pulled her out of her thoughts. Did she *want* to tell Akihiko? No. Would she tell him anyway? She had to. "I will. But I'm going to go whether he lets me or not."

Her daughter seemed surprised by her determination, but she shook it off and nodded her head. "If Dad is okay with it, then we can go. But I'm going to take you to Mementos. It's safer."

It was odd to hear that a twisted, distorted world was *safe* . “Okay?”

“You just need to talk to someone, right?”

She also wanted to *punch* Igor in the face, but she didn’t tell Makoto that.

“Ren stands off to the side of the first floor. He never tells us what he’s doing.” Makoto chuckled. “I just figured he spaced out. He doesn’t get a lot of sleep.”

Minako tried to hide her laugh behind her hand. “Sounds like someone’s well on her way to being a star *girlfriend* .”

Makoto’s face flushed, but Minako swore she caught a flash of *pain* in her eyes. It was a split second. It made her curious. She was going to question it when the front door clicked open and a second later, Akihiko came into the room.

He glanced to her, to Makoto, then back to her. “W-What?”

Makoto said nothing, stood up from the couch, wished them both a goodnight, then headed off to her room. Minako sighed and thought about doing the same, but Akihiko reached out to stop her.

“Are you mad?”

Was she? A little. He had been extremely secretive since his warning about Akechi. She didn’t want him out running around with the injuries he was still healing from, but he didn’t listen to her. She knew he didn’t like to be kept inside for long, but she would have felt better *knowing* what he was doing and why it was more important than his rest.

“How was your date?”

It was his turn to sigh. “I had to talk to Fuuka and Mitsuru about what they learned.”

“What did they learn?”

She asked because she knew he wouldn’t answer. But she wanted

him to grow uncomfortable. “Um…well, not much. Nothing that could really help me…”

Minako thought it best not to challenge him and flipped the tables. “Makoto is taking me to this Mementos tomorrow.”

Akihiko stared back at her, confused. “Where?”

“Mementos.” His hand fell from her wrist. “I guess it’s the Metaverse, but safer?”

“Why?”

She chuckled. “I don’t know why it’s safer. Makoto didn’t really-,”

“No, I meant, why do you need to go there?”

Minako only gave him a hard stare. A second later, everything seemed to click in his mind. “Oh. Right. Sorry.”

“I just want answers,” she told him as calmly as she could. “I don’t want to fight. Makoto said what I am looking for should be at the start, like it was for me back when we did this.”

Akihiko slowly nodded his head. “Yeah, but, I’m still going with you.” He reached back out for her hand. “I have to, or you’ll see something in the background and run off to chase it and get lost.”

She felt a smile creep on her face. “And you’re not in the best of shape to be fighting off enemies that chase after me.”

“No, I’m not.” He tugged on her wrist and she stepped into him, laying her head against his chest. “So let’s not get too carried away with this. Alright?”

It felt like the longest night of her life. She figured the only reason Akihiko was asleep next to her was because he had taken some of his pain medication (he had told her he was not in a *tremendous* amount of pain, but it would help). Her mind wouldn’t shut off, no matter how many times she closed her eyes, focused on Akihiko’s even breaths, counted her own inhales and exhales…

She was *so close* to finding out the truth. She could feel it. There were too many *what if's* for her to even think about sleep. She had to be prepared for anything. There might not be time for a second chance. It had to go right the first time…

For most of the night, Minako was in and out of a light sleep. The deepest part of her sleep was about an hour before she felt Akihiko shift next to her, a common sign that he was probably getting ready to get up. She groaned quietly, wishing she could have at least slept another hour or two, but figured sneaking some of his coffee would get her moving for as long as she needed to.

She did not expect him to roll over and wrap his arm around her. He wasn't much of a morning cuddler, since he oftentimes had to work, and if not, he liked to keep to his routine while she was asleep. A part of her wondered if he was still asleep, so she tried to pretend like she wasn't focusing in on his breathing or other signs to let her know one way or another.

"You didn't sleep, did you?"

Sometimes, she wondered if he was a mind reader. She remained as she was, but pulled on his arm and held his hand between both of hers. She was oddly comfortable now and thought if maybe she closed her eyes, she could sleep. "No. Not really."

She felt him move closer to her until her back was against his chest. "You really need to get some sleep."

She laughed at the irony of the situation. Akihiko was the one who needed more sleep. She had slept long enough for her lifetime. She could manage one day without it. "I don't think I'll be able to. Not until today is over with."

He was quiet, almost to the point Minako thought he fell back asleep. Then she felt his hand move between hers, running his thumb along the edges of her knuckles. "What if…what if you don't learn anything?"

It had been a question she asked herself hours ago. If she didn't learn anything, would she be pissed? Would she be sad? Would she

just shrug her shoulders because it really hadn't been that important? It was the *past* . Knowing what happened wouldn't change anything.

Right?

"I don't know," she replied honestly. "But I want to try."

He buried his head in her hair. She knew he was still tired. Hell, now that she was in her comfort zone, she could have slept, too. "I know I'm not one to say this, but don't let it get to you. Regardless of if you get the answers you want or not, or nothing at all, it won't change who you are. Okay?"

Had he been stressing over this all night, too? Had that been why he took his medication? To shut off his mind and calm his worries? In reply, she laced her fingers through his and squeezed his hand. "I'd be lying if I told you I would be okay with learning nothing, but what more can I do?"

She almost made the mistake of reminding him that her main purpose was to get access to her personas again so she could save their daughter. But she didn't want to bring up Sae right now. Not until she knew for sure she could do something to help.

"We'll take the day as it comes," he said, his voice muffled by her hair. "And I'll be right there with you."

Minako initially didn't want Akihiko to go with her, but now, she thought herself foolish for thinking she could do this without him. She *needed* him with her, injured or not, because she knew better than to think she could face the truth on her own.

Akihiko was the first one to get out of bed almost an hour later. Minako had fallen back asleep, but the second he left, she became cold. Any other day, she would have called out for him to come back to bed, he would likely laugh and tell her he had to get ready for work, and she would get up herself. This morning, however, would hopefully be the only weird morning where she *wanted* to get up and moving. The quicker she found her answers, the quicker she could go back to a normal (or not) life.

Makoto was already up and preparing a small breakfast by the time she stumbled out of the room. She was more tired than she thought she was. On the off chance she would be required to fight, she wouldn't be able to last. Makoto seemed to catch on and was kind enough to make her a plate and put it at her spot on the table.

"Um, are you sure you're okay?"

Minako dropped her head into her palm, trying to sound bright and chipper so Makoto didn't have to worry. "Your dad kept kicking me last night and talking about protein."

Akihiko quickly rounded the corner from the kitchen and spoke in his defense. "No I didn't!"

Poor Makoto continued to stand at the table, her eyes shooting from Akihiko to her, until finally, Minako laughed to herself. "I didn't wake him up because I knew he was exhausted."

"Your mom's a good storyteller."

She watched Akihiko disappear back into the kitchen and Makoto pulled out a chair next to her and sat down. "Are you going to be okay? We don't have to go today. We can go when you're-,"

"I have to go today, Makoto." She met her daughter's eyes. "I don't care what I learn, but I need to get this over with."

Makoto seemed to understand and started picking at her breakfast. Akihiko eventually sat down with them, but not after dropping a cup of dark coffee in front of her. She gave him a look as he took his seat, but he only shrugged his shoulders.

"Consuming so much sugar first thing in the morning will only make you crash later." She rolled her eyes at him, then wrapped her hands around the cup. "Coffee kind of loses its value if you process it the way *you* do."

She lifted the cup to her lips and did her *very* best not to throw the damn cup at his head. "You say this like you haven't told me a million times before."

He took a drink from his own. “Yeah, I know. You just don’t want to listen.”

It wasn’t until Makoto let out a light chuckle that the back-and-forth was put to a stop. As soon as her eyes landed on her, Makoto straightened out her back and looked down at her plate. “S-Sorry…”

A small smile came to her face. “You’re supposed to be on *my* side of this argument, Makoto.”

Her cheeks flushed, then she shook her head. “It’s kind of nice… hearing you guys talk like this…”

Across the table, Akihiko chuckled. “Pretty sure your mother thought about throwing that coffee cup at my head.”

“I should have done it.”

Makoto lifted her hands to her mouth and laughed again. “You should have slept better if you didn’t want Dad to come down your throat about it.”

Akihiko smiled triumphantly. “Thank you, Makoto.”

Minako only rolled her eyes and took a drink of the bitter liquid. How the hell Akihiko managed to drink this crap every morning was beyond her. “This is terrible.”

“Well,” Akihiko said with a grin. “You had plenty of time to get used to the taste. You just chose not to.”

When Makoto giggled again, she *almost* threw the cup at him.

But, like Makoto had said, it was kind of nice being so carefree after months and years of drama. Minako *did* settle for a slap to the back of Akihiko’s head as soon as she forced herself to finish her drink.

The cheeriness didn’t last much longer.

As soon as they were all ready, Makoto told them how to get to where she entered Mementos. She told them that she could meet them there, to avoid suspicion of being seen together.

That was when Akihiko stopped her. “It’s fine. I’d rather not have you be alone. Either of you.”

Minako bit her bottom lip to keep herself from crying at how sweet he sounded.

“W-What?”

Akihiko rubbed the back of his head, met her eyes for half a second, then sighed. “Makoto, I don’t care if people see us together. Especially if that’s going to jeopardize your safety. If someone asks, well…I’ll tell them it’s none of their business.”

Makoto continued to stare back at him with a surprised, blank look, but Minako walked up to him and wrapped her arms around one of his. “No. It’s not, is it?”

“So, um…” Akihiko coughed into his other hand. “Let’s get going.”

It was odd to be out and about as a *family* , regardless of where they were headed. However, there was still a fair bit of distance that made Minako laugh to herself. Makoto was on her phone most of the time, helping take care of some “student council business” or something. Akihiko stood next to her, but he didn’t hold her hand or really speak to her much unless he had to. Minako had to remind herself that she needed to take this one step at a time. And right now, it was a *huge* step for Akihiko to make, especially given the dangerous mess that surrounded him.

Several minutes later, Makoto came to a stop in a small alcove out of the way in Shibuya Station. “Are you guys ready?”

Suddenly, Minako wanted to laugh, grab Akihiko’s hand, and tell Makoto everything was fine and they could go home. She knew she would be a little nervous, but not like *this* . What would this new world look like? Tartarus? Death? Would going back be enough to awaken her personas and then she wouldn’t be able to control them?

She felt a hand grab a hold of hers and she realized that she had been holding her breath. “Are you alright?”

She gave him a small smile, but she knew better than to lie to him. “A little nervous, but, you’re both here. I’ll be okay.”

A minute later, she was grateful Akihiko had been standing next to her. Everything was spinning. Her vision. Her mind. Her stomach. Once it all stopped, she felt her knees give out, but she didn’t fall to the ground. The world was dark. Haunted. *Bloody* . Where in gods name had Makoto taken them?

“Are you okay, Mom?”

“Where are we?”

Minako was finally able to push out of Akihiko’s arms and stand on her own. She was still somewhat dizzy and sick, but then she saw Makoto. “W-What are you wearing?”

Had she been so out of it that Makoto ran and changed into…some rebel looking *biker* gear? Why? Akihiko looked the same way he did when he entered. Why did he let Makoto do this?

“This didn’t happen the last time.” She felt a little better knowing Akihiko was just as confused about Makoto’s change. “How did you do that? And *why?”*

Makoto rubbed one of her arms. “Well, I don’t know why it happened. But…when I first summoned my persona, I got a new outfit, too. Morgana says it symbolizes our desire for change…or, something like that.”

Akihiko gave her a look, then turned back to Makoto. “So you’re a *biker* on the inside?”

Makoto’s head dropped to her chest. “I really don’t understand it. But…I liked riding around with Mitsuru. It was, I don’t know, a freedom of sorts. I didn’t design this or ask someone to give it to me. It just…happened.”

She saw something click in Akihiko’s eyes. “You have brass knuckles.”

Minako could feel some level of excitement coming off of him.

Makoto lifted her hand and smiled beneath that metal mask she wore. “Yes. I fight just like you taught me to.”

She could sense where this conversation was headed, so Minako stepped between the two of them. “We’re not here to fight, remember? You’re *hurt* ,” she said as she poked Akihiko in the chest. He seemed *so* disappointed. “We shouldn’t stay here too long.”

She didn’t tell them that she felt sick, or that she had a pounding headache, or that the air was so *thick* that she could barely breathe. She didn’t know if that was a good sign or not. It clearly didn’t seem to be affecting Makoto or Akihiko the same way. Or were they just used to it? Or were they suffering a little bit and hiding it well?

Minako thought it would be best to start her search for the soft blue light she had seen years ago. She realized they were at some messed up looking train station, but there looked to be only one way out, and that was down. Her best and likely only chance to find the Velvet Room had to be on this floor. While she had never been someone to *sense* danger, why would Igor suddenly change his ways and put an entrance in the middle of the actual dungeon?

She started walking around, trying to ignore the pounding migraine and the swirling of her stomach. She thought she heard someone call out to her, but she kept pushing forward. So far, there was no light that would have signaled the entrance to the Velvet Room. Was it blue anymore? She should have asked Ren…

A few steps later, she pressed her hands to the side of her head to try and keep the pressure from building. Was she that out of shape and couldn’t handle a little gravity change? Was that what happened? Was she still reeling from the travel to this world? Was someone trying to tell her to *stop?*

“Minako.”

Akihiko caught her before she fell forward and hit the ground. She was in pain. She thought she was going to throw up. But she couldn’t give up. She hadn’t learned anything. Surely the light would come to her if she kept walking a little bit more…

“We should head back, Makoto.”

Minako grabbed a fistful of his shirt and tried to keep her voice steady. “No. We can’t…”

The fear in his eyes made her heart hurt. “You can barely stand up. You keep holding your head. We can try again some other time when you’ve gotten your sleep.”

“Makoto.” She was able to stand up with Akihiko’s help, but he had another thing coming if he thought she was going to call it *quits* because she wasn’t feeling well. “Where does Ren usually go? Do you know? Can you show me?”

Makoto looked to Akihiko for guidance, but he thankfully didn’t try and challenge her. She had to lean against him for support, and he practically carried her behind Makoto as she showed her where the door should have been. If that was where Ren went to the room, hopefully…

“He usually wanders off to about here, then sits still for a while.”

The headache literally blinded her. She thought her ribs were broken. Had Akihiko not been holding her, she could have sworn she would have crumbled like a piece of paper and turned into nothing. She heard his voice, but the pain was so bad that she couldn’t make out what he was saying. He was probably panicking, so she had to fight back against the pain and open her eyes and know for herself if this was the door or not.

It was hard, but she managed to open her eyes enough to see.

And she saw nothing.

No blue light. Or any light. No door. Just the darkness, the blood, the dizzying tile pattern on the wall.

The rest of her strength left her, and she passed out in Akihiko’s arms.

Chapter 99

Chapter 99

He knew he shouldn't have taken Minako to the Metaverse. Even if she fought him and attacked him and *demanded* , he should have known better.

Makoto knelt next to him once they were all back in the *real* world. "I-Is she okay?"

Minako had passed out far too quickly for his liking, but he knew it wasn't from lack of sleep. She seemed quite mobile before they arrived in the Metaverse. But the second they were in the strange world, she only got worse and worse as time went on.

Akihiko felt terrible. The only thing that calmed him now was the fact Minako looked more peaceful rather than in pain. However, that left him in a bit of a predicament, since he couldn't just *carry* her home. They were going to have to take a train at some point.

"I think she'll be okay," he told Makoto as he reached for his phone. Mitsuru might not be happy with his decision to wander off into the Metaverse without her, but he didn't care. He needed someone to help get Minako home, and while he was at it, maybe Mitsuru could help him understand what happened to her.

He may have left out the part about going into Mementos and only told her Minako passed out at the station. He could feel out the situation from there.

But as soon as he put his phone back in his pocket, Minako sat up in his arms, scaring both him and Makoto half to death. "W-Where am I?"

All three of them struggled to catch their breath, but Akihiko was the first one to calm down enough to speak. "We're at the station. You passed out."

“D-Do you remember?”

Minako’s eyes traveled back and forth between his and Makoto’s, then rested on him. “Yeah…”

“Are you okay?”

She slowly nodded her head, a hand coming to rub her temple. “That was weird, but I feel much better now.”

Makoto leaned in closer to her. “What happened?”

Minako inhaled deeply and became dead weight in his arms. “I just remember feeling like some force was pushing against my head, my chest, everything. Did you guys feel it, too?”

Akihiko was no expert, but in every case of traveling to a supernatural realm, he never once felt like that. He felt sick sometimes, but never like he was under pressure. He saw Makoto shake her head as well, then she shot him a concerning look, as if he would have all the answers.

“Let’s wait for Mitsuru.” He helped Minako sit up, then slowly pulled her to her feet. “Maybe she’ll have more answers for us.”

Minako was at least able to walk on her own to the closest exit, with some help. She sometimes tipped over while she was walking and stumbled into him. But, he was able to get her out of the station without drawing too much unwanted attention. Mitsuru didn’t say much to them as he helped Minako get into the car, but he could *feel* her eyes narrowing at him. Once both Minako and Makoto were in the vehicle, Akihiko turned to Mitsuru.

“Um, thank you. For your help.”

She continued to glare at him, making him nervous as he threw himself into the seat next to Minako. Mitsuru oddly said nothing the entire drive back to their apartment, but he had known her long enough to know she was *not* happy. But…how would she know they went to the Metaverse without her? Or had he done something *else* wrong?

Just when he thought he was safe, Mitsuru pulled into their parking lot and locked the doors to the car. “Who wants to go first?”

Akihiko exhaled deeply as Minako’s head fell to his shoulder. “We only went to learn something. We didn’t even fight.” Then, before Mitsuru could turn around and ask another question, he added, “And how did you know where we were?

“You underestimate me, Akihiko.” He felt himself sink in his spot. “What did you go to learn?”

“Why I lost my powers.”

Akihiko thought Minako had fallen asleep or was still unwell, so her voice startled him. Even still, Mitsuru’s tone didn’t change. “And I’m assuming that did not go well for you, did it?”

“Stop that,” he fired back, doing his best to keep the conversation light. He knew, to some degree, how Minako felt about wanting answers. No one was hurt, so Mitsuru needed to lighten up. “This was important to her, and had you been in the same position, you would want answers, too.”

He felt Minako reaching for his hand and he glanced over to find a small smile on her face. Thankfully, Mitsuru also chose to lose her glare and sighed. “Perhaps. But I would have wanted to go with you.”

“We didn’t learn anything,” came Makoto’s quiet response. “And we didn’t do more than walk around the first floor. There’s never any monsters there.”

Minako leaned against him harder, like she was in pain or aggravated and trying to hide it. “I wanted to go to the Velvet Room. Makoto said Ren can go, so I wanted to try myself.”

It led him to the question that had been on his mind since Amamiya was brought up the first time on their trip. “Um. Why is Amamiya going to that place?”

Both Makoto and Minako turned their heads to look at him. Some sense of clarity came over Mitsuru’s face. “He’s a wild card.”

Akihiko had to let that sink in.

No wonder the kid was able to get along well with everyone. No wonder Minako felt comfortable with him. No wonder he was able to pull Makoto out of her shell and make her more confident. That was probably why Akihiko never thought he was a bad kid…

Minako's voice pulled him out of his thoughts. "But when I went, I just felt sick. Like…some force was trying to keep me from going back…or something. It was weird."

His eyes searched Mitsuru's for a moment, wondering if she would know *why* Minako was the only one in so much pain. It hadn't been that way for the Dark Hour. He never *hurt* when they went to the Metaverse. Why was it just Minako?

"Maybe someone doesn't want you to get your powers back…"

It was a vague statement, but it had also been his first thought. Mitsuru continued on. "But I'm afraid I'm not all that knowledgeable about that world. Perhaps you simply cannot enter without a persona to numb the effects."

From the corner of his eye, he saw Makoto twisting to face them. "Um, I was actually able to enter without a persona the first time, and I didn't feel anything. Other than being a little sick. But nothing like a pressure…"

Mitsuru's eyes locked with his. "I think we need to speak to someone, wouldn't you agree?"

It took him a minute or two to understand what Mitsuru had even been talking about. Once he did, he could feel the air around him grow cold and then tighten around his throat. "Um, I…I don't think I'm ready for this…"

Mitsuru spun back around in her seat like he had agreed to speak to their last hope at understanding *anything* . "The sooner we get this over with, the sooner it will be behind us."

Minako and Makoto gave him a look, but he tried to avoid their question by nodding his head. "Makoto, make sure your mother gets

some rest." He really hoped Minako couldn't tell how nervous he was getting. "Mitsuru and I have a contact that might know a little bit more about this."

Minako was the first to do something. She sighed, probably annoyed that he was being *secretive* again, but Makoto eyed him curiously for longer than he expected. "Who?"

"We will let you know of our findings once we learn them."

He was thankful Makoto respected Mitsuru enough not to question her, so she nodded her head and stepped out of the car, leaving the door open for Minako to do the same. Before Minako pushed away from him, she grabbed his wrist and squeezed. "Is this going to end up like the last time you tried to *talk* to someone?"

The air left his lungs in a cold, mad rush. "N-No. We're going to talk to a friend. A *good* friend."

She released him, but he knew she still had her doubts. "Fine. Just be home before dinner, okay? And if you do find yourself in that situation again, don't hide it from me."

Minako got out of the car before he could find the voice to tell her everything would be *fine* . Because while he knew nothing bad would happen like last time, he wasn't prepared. It wasn't something that would be easy, especially if Mitsuru wanted to be there with him.

"Let's go."

But she wasn't giving him much of a choice.

Akihiko had the drive to think things over at least. He tried to remember how he wanted to approach the topic, how he would change his line of questioning if things took a turn, and how to get his answers quickly, truthfully, and respectfully.

"I know you don't want to do this, Akihiko, but we need answers, and she's our best option now."

He sighed deeply. "She's a child."

“And speaking to children about traumatizing events is your specialty.” She returned her eyes to the road when he cringed. “We cannot keep postponing this conversation.”

He ran a hand over his face. “She needs more time. I barely know her. I wanted to be fully ready, not half-ass prepared and waste her time.”

The car came to a stop a few minutes later. “I know I am asking a lot of you, but I also know that I cannot ask this of anyone else.” They were parked at Yongen-Jaya Station. All they had to do was walk around a corner to get to Sakura’s shop. Would Futaba be there, or at her home, or out and about with her friends? Hopefully out and about with her friends…

Mitsuru’s heavy sigh made him feel a little guilty. “Just like you, and Minako, I too want answers. And I regret never giving Isshiki a second glance. Perhaps if I had, these mental shutdowns never would have occurred and Isshiki never would have been killed.”

“Stop.” He knew Mitsuru felt some degree of guilt over Isshiki’s death, but she shouldn’t have. It wasn’t her fault. Even if she had spoken to her, someone (he still thought Shido was involved, but he wouldn’t tell her that) would have killed her anyway. The Metaverse, the Dark Hour, whatever the fuck all of that was, it made *no* sense. It probably never would. And when it started to, it would change. She couldn’t keep beating herself up over it.

So, he took a deep breath and nodded to her. “I’ll talk to her. But I won’t push her.”

Akihiko made a move for the door, but Mitsuru’s voice stopped him. “Thank you, Akihiko.”

He also *hated* when she thanked him, because if he was honest, he was in debt to her for the rest of his life. But, he chose to say nothing and stepped out of the car. Mitsuru followed after him a moment later. However, when they both stepped inside the coffee shop, Akihiko’s eyes found Amamiya and Futaba hunched over the sink. Sojiro walked up to where Mitsuru had taken a seat, then cast him a confused look.

“Divorced already, eh?”

He felt Mitsuru’s eyes on him, but he walked down the bar to sit at the spot closest to where the two teens were standing. Sojiro didn’t comment and went about making their drinks. Not that he needed the caffeine, but something to focus on would be nice…

“Hey!”

Futaba, thankfully, looked very pleased to see him. “Hi.”

She ran up to his side and smiled cheerfully at him. “I’m gonna give you a tech class 101 one day. Be ready.”

He found himself laughing at that. “That’s very generous of you. But I don’t think I’ll learn much.” He lifted his wrist with his watch. “I tend to get more *irritated* than patient.”

Amamiya smirked. Akihiko’s glare quickly wiped it from his face.

Futaba whipped out her phone and began talking far too fast for him to pick up what she was talking about. He caught bits and pieces about what she planned to do in Akihabara, what shops she wanted to stop by, new gadgets for something. But the longer she spoke to him, the more his heart fell in his chest. She was a bright and happy child right now. He didn’t want to be the one to crush her so early…

But he didn’t have a choice, did he?

“Actually,” he started, thankful that Sojiro had dropped off his coffee so he could hold on to something. “I was hoping I could speak to you.”

“Oh?” She cocked her head to the side, her hands behind her back, eyes wide with wonder. “Need information on someone bad?”

Did she *know?* Or was that sly grin on her face telling her she wanted to see how far he would let her go without a reprimand or criminal charges? “Um, well, kind of.”

She started to pick up on his hesitation. He felt terrible for ruining her mood. It was apparent enough of a change that Amamiya came

to step up behind her. “Something wrong?”

Futaba needed to be comfortable. If she was comfortable with Amamiya, then he could stay. He wouldn’t be *happy* about it, but this wasn’t about *him* . “Can we talk somewhere in private?”

He saw Futaba reach behind her for Amamiya’s shirt and Akihiko almost told her never mind. He could wait. Mitsuru could wait. Futaba, however, pulled on Amamiya so she could whisper something in his ear, then the boy looked up at him.

“Um, she said we can talk…upstairs, if you want…”

Futaba’s eyes watched him carefully, but it was the first time he had even *noticed* an upstairs. If that was okay with her, then it was okay with him. He nodded his head slowly, pushed his chair back, and followed behind Amamiya and Futaba. Before he took the first step, he turned back to Mitsuru, who must have known what was happening as she simply nodded in approval.

There was no going back now.

Amamiya at least was wise enough to pull out a chair for him, but as Akihiko glanced around the room, he couldn’t help but wonder. “You…You live here?”

Amamiya’s hands went into his pockets, but Futaba didn’t leave his side. “Yeah. It’s not too bad though. Better than a jail cell.”

Akihiko suddenly felt bad for asking. But he wouldn’t admit that. His eyes fell from Amamiya to Futaba, who in turn took a step behind the boy. Akihiko tried to lower himself to be eye-level with her, but when his knee started throbbing, he slowly stood back up.

“Let’s sit down.”

He hated Amamiya.

But, once he was seated and his leg was stretched out, he looked back over to Futaba. “I’m not going to lie to you. I need information about your mother. If at any point you want to stop, or don’t want to talk, you are more than welcome to let me know. The last thing I

want for you is to make you uncomfortable."

Amamiya lowered his eyes to the girl sitting next to him. She nodded her head slowly, but Akihiko thought it wise not to assume she was going to be open without a little bit of prying.

"Do you know what your mom did at the lab she worked at?"

Futaba was already young. He didn't know her exact age, but she was younger than Amamiya, he knew that. Her mother died a few years ago. So for a young child to *understand* the nature of her work would be damn near impossible. Even if Futaba was an intelligent child.

"She studied cognitive psience."

That was a new term. "What's that?"

She leaned into Amamiya and started playing with her hands. "I don't think I can say anything."

"It's okay, Futaba." Amamiya dropped his head to say something to her, then her eyes grew wide and she leaned over to look at him.

"You have a persona?"

Akihiko stumbled over his words. "U-Uh, yeah." He didn't think that would have been brought up, but in retrospect, he should have led with that. "So don't hold back on my account."

Futaba continued to gape at him. "Wow…I thought you'd be too old or something."

He exhaled deeply, then thought it would be better to give Futaba *his* side of the story. She might be more open, and she might be able to provide more insight. "My friends and I fought in something called the Dark Hour. It's not really the same as the Metaverse, since it happened every day, every midnight. It had effects on those outside of that, which we penned the name Apathy Syndrome. They were basically soulless, in a sense. When we defeated the big bad guy, it supposedly went away."

He left off the topic about Minako's sacrifice, for his own sake. "But with this world, you can go whenever. We didn't have palaces, or an app to take us."

Futaba stared back at him, but he could tell her mind was trying to comprehend what he was saying. "Huh…"

He then added, "I also never fought someone in my subconscious and have it actually be *real* . The only time I faced my own shadow was when I was face to face with it. Like a mirror. This was different."

That sparked Futaba's interest. "You…You had a shadow?"

"Twice," he said with a light chuckle. "Years ago, but there's a lot to that story. Recently, some black mask guy came to me when I was sleeping, I think, and tried to kill me. Had I not had my persona, he would have succeeded."

"B-Black mask guy?"

They were slightly off-topic, but he needed to be patient. If anything, Futaba was interested. Interested people tended to *talk* . However, he wouldn't tell her *who* he thought it was, just in case she took that as fact and Akechi wasn't the culprit.

"He killed my mom, too!"

She actually hopped off of her chair and stomped her foot several times. Amamiya grabbed her wrist. "It's okay. Calm down."

But if Akechi really was the guy with the black mask, how in the hell did he kill Futaba's mother? Akihiko knew children could be dangerous, but *murder?* He had serious doubts about that. Maybe a brother? Did Akechi have any family?

He thought it best to get Futaba to give him *facts* . "Tell me more about her research."

When the young girl took her seat again, she huffed and crossed her arms. For a while, she was silent, and Akihiko figured that was the end of the conversation. Then, "She knew about the Metaverse. The

cognitive versions of humans. She knew that if someone killed a human's shadow in the other world, that human would suffer a mental shutdown."

Akihiko almost fell out of his chair. "H-How do you know all of this?" Surely if Mitsuru found any data on Isshiki's lab, she would have put it all together. Did Isshiki feel that confident to talk to her daughter about it while having it make total sense?

"Her notes. My recent change of heart."

Something poked at his heart. "A change of heart?"

Futaba dropped her head. "I was real mad at myself. Believed I killed my mom. Sat in my room for months, wishing I could sleep and wake up and have her there."

He gave Futaba a second to deal with the wave of emotions he could see taking over her. He needed the moment, too. To think that this small child had gone through hell while thinking it was *her fault* destroyed him…

"For a while, I tried to look everywhere I could. Books. Webpages. I hacked into some databases, but I couldn't find anything."

Her statement confirmed Mitsuru's previous worries. Someone *had* stolen or deleted Isshiki's work. Not that he would praise Futaba for *hacking* , but this was a rare case. And it worked for him. And he needed Fuuka to do the same on several occasions…

"But it wasn't until these guys came and saved me that I was able to learn that she was killed. And now, I feel like it's my duty as her daughter to find out the truth!"

Despite the heartbreaking situation, he found himself smiling. "I'm sure she's very proud of you." And in that moment, his thoughts veered off to Sae. Even if he told her time and time again how proud he was of her, she wouldn't react like this.

Was all of this information why Sae needed to harass Sojiro?

Because if Isshiki *did* study the Metaverse, she knew about the mental shutdowns, and Sae would probably like to know that as well. If she did, would she realize the game she was playing, or would she only be after the information to prove her worth and earn bragging rights?

Stay on topic . “Why do you think she was killed?”

Futaba retreated into herself for a minute. “Um, I…I don’t know.” Akihiko gave her a few more moments to think, but he didn’t want to give her his thoughts. He couldn’t drop Shido’s name, or Akechi’s. He needed to hear it from her, as hard as it was to do.

He was about to ask her another question when her quiet voice reached his ears. “She knew…she knew how the black mask guy was killing people. And if my mom’s research went public, then… then that would make him mad.”

There was no solid proof of that, but Akihiko knew that was *exactly* why she was killed. Now, he just needed *names* . “Sakura-san told me someone in particular was very interested in her work.”

When Futaba looked up at Amamiya, he held his breath. “O-Oh. I-I don’t know him, but my mom didn’t really like it when people came to work to see her. Even Sojiro.”

Maybe he would have to pull Sojiro aside to ask him about his thoughts on Shido another time. He should have known better than to believe that Futaba would be able to specifically point him out, especially after admitting that Isshiki didn’t let anyone get close to her…

“I-I’m sorry I can’t tell you who killed her…”

Akihiko held Futaba’s teary eyes for a second or two before he had to look away. “Please. Don’t ever say that. You’ve given me a lot of vital information. I know this couldn’t have been easy for you, so this means a lot. Thank you.”

She wiped a hand behind her glasses, then shook her head and leaned back into Amamiya. “I should be thanking you. For years,

everyone just saw me as a deranged murderer. But you are going out of your way to help me. And my mom…I never thought anyone would care about her like this…"

He didn't know what to say to her. He felt terrible. He couldn't even really say he deserved her thanks since he hadn't even known who Isshiki was until a few months ago. The woman had been *killed* and he hadn't even bothered to look into it…

The next second, Futaba was on her feet, bowing deeply to him. "Thank you. Seriously."

Then, she bolted for the stairs before he could even find his voice. Akihiko watched her run off and down the stairs, then sighed deeply. If only he could tell her he would find the person responsible and force him to suffer just as she had to years ago…

"You really are amazing."

Akihiko turned to where Amamiya was pushing himself off his chair. "What?"

"Futaba barely speaks to anyone. Ryuji hates everyone. I distrust cops. But here you are, reaching out to us anyway."

He failed to have a comeback ready, and Amamiya soaked it up. "Maybe one day, I'll be able to have the honor of calling you my dad."

It was a good thing Amamiya took his chance to follow after Futaba into a public area, or Akihiko would have permanently beaten that smirk off of his face…

Chapter 100

Chapter 100

It had been a bizarre few days.

First, her dad was arrested, beaten, then released under Mitsuru's orders. Makoto was curious to know how Sae was dealing with the backlash, but a small part of her didn't care. Her dad didn't kill anyone. He wasn't a Phantom Thief. He was telling Sae the truth, but it wasn't what she wanted to hear, but she kept trying. It was her own fault, even if Makoto would never say that to her face.

Then, she had to deal with her mom and whatever had happened in Mementos. While Makoto often felt sick to her stomach when they warped into the Metaverse, it always passed. What happened to her mother was strange. She hadn't had the heart to explain the situation to Ren, in case he grew upset with her for going without him. But she had to eventually, because who else would *know?*

Still, her mom had been kind of sad and tired days after returning. Her dad didn't seem to notice, but he was also very busy running around and doing something he wouldn't tell her or her mom about. It put her more on edge. Her mom wasn't *secretive* like her dad was, but she was quiet. Makoto at least found herself distracted by taking over the cooking for the week.

And then came her recent dilemma with her friends. They had found Morgana once they had sneaked off into Okumura's palace, but he was with a new face. Together, they didn't seem to want their help. Ryuji was okay with that, strangely enough, but even though Makoto wanted to quit, she didn't want to abandon Morgana, which would hurt Ren and Futaba in the end. They just needed to speak to their suspected new member, whom they had recently realized was Okumura's daughter, Haru, before something happened to her or Morgana.

Truth be told, Makoto was kind of excited to have a new member. Haru was a senior. Not that she disliked any of her friends, but

someone her age would have been nice. Haru seemed to be more distant, but whether that was because of her personality or the fact she was *rich* , Makoto wanted to find out. After all, she knew all too well how it felt to be alone...

But if she had to chase after Morgana *one more time* after he tricked them all into thinking he was tired and cornered, she was going to storm out of Mementos and let him do his own thing.

"That little *bastard!"*

Never once in a million years would Makoto picture herself agreeing with Ryuji, but she did. She didn't want to change hearts anymore. She didn't want to keep up the cat-and-mouse game. She just wanted to focus on college and her future and try and bring back a smile to her parents' faces...

That mentality hit a brick wall when they finally caught Morgana, took Haru back to Leblanc, and she explained the situation to them.

Sae might claim that their dad was the worst, but Haru's father was *sickening* . How could he just ship off his daughter to a creep for political recognition? Makoto's dad at least loved them, even if it was more at a distance, so they could be safe. He would *never* do anything like this to her, or Sae...

It brought her back to her crushing guilt. Haru could talk openly about her dad, how she still loved him, despite knowing what he was doing, but she understood that he was in the wrong. She wanted to fight for him because she knew that he would become the father she had loved at one point if she did, before he became obsessed with power.

Sae was much the same, but Makoto didn't *want* to talk to her friends about her family, or about her sister and her palace, or that Sae was being too dramatic and was ultimately ruining lives.

She felt a poke to her head, then she realized her surroundings. She was still in Ren's room, but her friends had long since left. It was just her, Ren, and Morgana. Ren gave her a classic *Ren* smile, but she was quick to look away before she burned under his gaze.

"You spaced out for a while."

She figured as much, since the last thing she remembered was Haru talking about how much she loved a man that was crooked and needed to be stopped... "Yes, I'm sorry. I hope I didn't come across as rude..."

Ren pulled up a chair and sat in front of her. "You're cute when you space out."

Despite herself, she felt the heat on her cheeks. "Will you stop that?"

"What were you thinking about?"

Makoto also really hated that all she had to tell Ren was the usual. "Do you think I'm a bad person?"

He was quiet for a moment, then burst into laughter. "Why in the world would I think that?"

"Because I haven't told the others about my family. I don't have the heart to face my sister like Haru can face her father. All I do is sit and complain and say I want to take action, but when it comes down to it, I don't want to."

She almost choked on her exhale, but Ren was quick to reach over for her hand. "Makoto, look at me." It took her several seconds to find the courage to do what he asked. "You're a wonderful person. But if I'm being honest, sometimes I feel like you expect too much out of yourself."

She narrowed her eyes. "What does that mean?"

He didn't let her go. "Ryuji doesn't talk about his family. Ann doesn't either. Yusuke will if you ask him, as will Futaba, to an extent. So why are you the only one expected to talk about your family?"

"Because my sister has a palace." She pushed herself up to her feet in a panic. "Do they have family members who have lost so much of themselves that they have a *palace?"*

A sad look came to Ren's eyes. "No. I don't think so. But why does

that make *you* the bad person?"

"We're going to have to face her, Ren." She willed herself not to cry. "I know we are, but I *can't* . And how many more lives is she going to destroy before I find the heart to do what I needed to do months ago?"

"Why do you think *you* have to do anything?"

Makoto fumbled for words for a moment. "B-Because she's my sister. I have the ability to do something. Haru has the strength to face *her* father and-,"

"Stop comparing yourself to others, Makoto."

She fell silent. Ren sighed heavily before he rubbed at the back of his head in frustration. "You're not Haru. Her dad is not your dad, or your sister. While I think it's good to find motivation from someone else, that doesn't make your pain any less *painful* ." His head fell to his chest and she couldn't see his face anymore. "You do so much to help people without a second thought, and I think it's natural to feel hesitant about thinking negatively about people you love."

Desperate to derail the conversation, she asked, "Do you feel that way...about your parents?"

It was the first time she had pried him to talk about his family. The surprise showed on his face when he jerked back. Makoto was going to apologize for asking when Ren held up a hand to stop her. "Honestly, had you asked me this when we first met, I would have told you no. I figured they wanted nothing more to do with me, so why should I feel anything for them? But watching you, and our friends, especially *you* , I've learned that there's two sides of every story. And until I hear theirs, I can't make myself hate them."

It was weird to be in her position, listening to Ren talk about *his* family instead of the other way around. However, it also made her happy knowing that he felt comfortable enough being open with her. Ren must have noticed the small smile on her face and was quick to comment on it.

"One day, I'll have to introduce my amazing and cute girlfriend to them. Assuming she still wants to be with a criminal months from now."

Had his grin not been on his face, Makoto might have had a heart attack. She huffed while he started to chuckle, then folded her arms across her chest. "M-Maybe I won't!"

"I won't let you walk away without a fight."

He always had something smooth to say, didn't he? Why couldn't she be like that? "I-I would beat you!"

Ren laughed again. "Yeah, you probably would." Then, he tugged on one of her hands that fell to her side and she collided into him. He wrapped both of his arms around her, but it was very difficult to *concentrate* pressed up against him without warning. She relaxed over time, accepting the weight of his head on hers, the gentle way he held her, the soft beating of his heart in her ear.

"You should probably get home."

The way he pulled away from her made her think she did something wrong. "O-Oh...okay."

He must have picked up on her train of thought. "Don't get me wrong, I don't want you to leave, but I also don't want to die and never see you again."

"Ren," she said with a laugh. "My dad isn't going to kill you." Her smile faded at the thought of her dad falling out of touch with her. "He's far too busy doing something that he wouldn't even know if I came home late or not."

She felt him drape an arm over her shoulder and slowly walk towards the stairs. "I mean, I kind of know the feeling. Being arrested and labeled for something you didn't do..."

Makoto sighed and dropped her head. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." He stopped her once they had reached the top of the stairs. "You should do something with him. Since, you know, you've

been kind of distracted yourself."

Ren spoke back up before she could. "Sorry. It's not my place to tell you what to do."

Makoto turned to him and bravely put a hand on his shoulder. His eyes followed her hand, but then he smiled and lifted one of his own to cover hers. "Um, no...i-it's okay. I actually haven't spent a lot of time with him since I came back. Maybe that would help."

"Just don't train," he added with a smile. "The last thing I need is for you to get *too* strong and pulverize me with a friendly pat on the back."

She stared back at him with a blank look, but when he chuckled at her, she turned away. "Maybe that's exactly what I'll do. And then punch you in the stomach again."

His grin only made her apprehensive. "Maybe I'd like that."

He didn't make sense sometimes.

She didn't comment on it, nor did he clarify, and he was kind enough to walk her to the station. He gave her a pouty face when she tried to walk onto the platform, which made her curious and embarrassed at the same time.

"W-What?"

He frowned harder. "I don't get a goodbye hug?"

Oh. She figured there were a few people out and about, but no one who would judge her. Or would they? Would Ren judge her if she confessed that she really wanted to *kiss* him? Was that too much to ask? Was there a book on this kind of stuff?

"O-Oh. Of course."

He smiled so childishly that Makoto thought he was ten. His grip on her was tight for a moment, but she didn't miss the way he pulled away from her almost as sharply as he came on to her. "Have a good night."

Was she doing something wrong? "Y-Yes. You too..."

He at least smiled at her, a *genuine* smile before he walked away. However, the rest of the way home, she couldn't shake the feeling that he wanted to say something to her, but he didn't. She might have been new to the entire *relationship* thing, to feeling comfortable with people in general, but if she was making him unhappy, she wanted to know.

It would probably be easier to text him when she got home. After all, she felt much better being able to *think* about what she would say on her own terms rather than having to say it on the spot. Maybe he would feel the same.

Sadly, no one was waiting for her when she got home. The kitchen was empty. So was the living room. Makoto put her bag down by the couch and thought about starting dinner on her own. It was kind of late, but she didn't see any signs of cooking or meal prep in the kitchen when she walked in.

It made her feel alone. In her own house. With her family. And she *hated* it.

Makoto turned and walked out of the kitchen. If she was going to distract her dad from whatever he was getting into, she had to distract her mom from herself, too. Her mom loved to cook, loved to show her new tricks and recipes, so she could do it again.

But before she could make it out of the living room and into the hall, she heard the door open and shut. Her heart started beating again when her dad stepped into the room carrying two bags of something. When his eyes met hers, he held both of them up with a small smile.

"I figured your mom was still tired. And I know you would go hungry if I offered to cook tonight."

It almost made her cry, even if she laughed to cover it up. "Please tell me it's not beef bowl."

He frowned at her, which made her heart feel lighter. "Then don't eat

it. More for me."

Dinner was a fairly quiet affair. Her mom had been asleep, and her dad told her not to wake her. So it was just the two of them. She felt awkward, for many reasons, but before the silence could suffocate her, she needed to start a conversation.

"Um. So. Would you, um...be willing to help me, with something?"

Why was she so nervous to speak to her father? And why would she ask him to help her when she didn't even know what she wanted him to help her with? But she didn't have the heart to ask him about his injuries, his take on Sae, or the Phantom Thieves, or her mom. It was her only fall back.

"Um. Okay?"

She swallowed hard, and it did not go unnoticed by her dad. "Makoto, you don't need to be so nervous."

Why have you been so distant? "Will you help me...um, find the student in Kabukicho?"

To be honest, Haru's situation had brought her mind back to helping that same student she had let fly under her radar weeks ago. And Ren had told her to give him a distraction. Ren also was the one who told her that she should ask *him* for help. Why not do it all?

However, his sigh killed her hopes. "You want me to go with you to a part of town I told you to stay away from?"

"W-Well..." She struggled for words a second longer, but then her mind ran away with her. "Well, I need to help them. Because just like you, I can't sit still when someone is in trouble and I can do something. I know you don't want us to be seen together, but I can be your pupil or something."

He paused and leaned back in his seat. "In case you haven't noticed Makoto, I've lost a lot of street cred being arrested *twice* ."

"You're still the best cop I know." She offered him a small smile when he looked over at her. "And since you're getting older, maybe

you could teach me some things."

She hoped her jab worked in her favor, but when he frowned, her heart sank. "You're serious?"

Makoto slowly nodded her head. "I am."

Her dad didn't say much else to her that night, which broke her heart in its own way. She may not know what she wanted to do in the future just yet, but he did his job well. She was proud of him. He didn't cave when the world was against him. And when the world was against him, how many people stood by his side and supported him?

No one, that she knew about. So if anything, Makoto wanted to follow after him, follow after her sister, just so she could be someone he could rely on. And if she followed in his footsteps, she could inspire more people to do the same, and then he would have an army at his back rather than just himself.

The next afternoon, once she returned home from school, she got one hell of a surprise.

Her dad handed her a small bag, but Makoto didn't take it right away. "W-What is this?"

"If you're going to play the part, you're going to look the part. And I would do it before your mom comes home from her shopping trip or we're not going anywhere."

That was when she reached for the bag and opened it up. Inside was a shirt, a hat, and a *badge* . "I-Is this...?"

"Hurry up. It will fit over your clothes. Your mom could be home any minute."

Makoto only threw on the police uniform because she didn't want to start crying at how much this all meant to her. She was curious to know where he had gotten all of this, even a uniform that *fit* , but she could wait and ask once they were out and about.

Her dad only spoke to her again once they stepped off the train in

Shinjuku. She felt him reach for her hat she held under her arm, then he put it on her head with a small smile. "Now. Rule number one. You stay next to me at all times. Try not to speak too much, or they will know you're not a trainee. Rule number two. Keep your back straight. Keep your eyes up. Don't smile too much. You're not their enemy, but you're not their friend. Okay?"

Makoto felt tears in her eyes when he did one last adjustment to her hat and stepped away from her. She nodded her head once, then smiled brightly. "Yes, sir!"

He wanted to say something to her, but he shook his head and signaled for her to follow after him. It was intimidating, but she was beyond excited. She looked the part, even if she didn't quite *feel* the part just yet. But she did what he told her and kept her back straight, head up, and tried to hide her smile as best she could.

Her heart began to race once they made the turn to walk down the main street, but it didn't take too long before someone called out to her dad. She could have sworn he rolled his eyes, but the man didn't seem bothered and walked right up to him.

"Look who's not *dead* yet."

"And look who's not in prison yet."

The man's eyes turned to her, then he narrowed them. *Back straight. Eyes up. Don't smile* . "Who're you?"

"She's the new trainee." Her dad's hand fell to her shoulder and she couldn't help but feel a swell of pride in her heart. "And I'd be careful with her. She'll kick your ass if you say something wrong."

The man didn't seem interested in her anymore and turned his attention back to her dad. "So. Whatcha here for?"

"A Shujin student." Makoto's ears perked up. "I've been told that one of their students has been seen here. Wouldn't do the businesses good if I found out they hired someone underage to work for them, ya know?"

The man held his chin in thought. "Hmm, can't say I've seen

anything. But, do me a little favor and I'll do you one."

A favor? Was this the kind of game her dad had to play for information? Did it work? "Yeah, yeah, I know. You give me a lead, and I'll look the other way."

...Was her dad allowing for *crime* to stop another crime? "Then I'll keep ya posted."

The conversation ended there, and once they were far enough away, Makoto couldn't help but ask. "Did you just allow him to commit a crime?"

He didn't look over at her. "It's the price you have to pay sometimes. But he's been good with his information for years. I think I can forgive him selling drugs to the mafia if he tells me about who he's selling to."

"But..." she started slowly. "Isn't that a crime?"

He nodded his head as his eyes scanned the area. "Yeah. But would you rather pluck a million leaves off branches or cut down the tree?"

"W-What?"

He sighed and Makoto thought he was disappointed. "What I'm saying is that sometimes going after the small fry is pointless and time consuming. If you go after the main criminal, you can take them all out."

She figured she had *much* to learn yet...

As time went on, many of the conversations she listened to were much the same as before. It was an interesting experience, to say the least. Makoto assumed a cop's responsibility was to arrest *any* bad guy, but as she listened to her dad talk to many of them, they all seemed willing to help, for a price. Sometimes, her dad handed them a small wad of cash. Other times, it was a free pass to do whatever they did.

"The world isn't black and white, Makoto," he told her as they walked

away from another person. "Sometimes you have to cross that threshold for the greater good."

"What if they hurt more people though?"

Her heart fell when he shrugged his shoulders. "Sometimes that happens. It's a risk you take. But you get better at making these kind of choices over time."

Did her dad make these mistakes as a rookie cop then? Would she, if she chose to pursue the career?

But then she felt a hand on her arm. When she looked over to her dad, he had a glare in his eyes that scared her. "S-Something wrong?"

He didn't say anything to her and slowly walked up to a young couple rounding a corner. Makoto knew her dad was injured, and he was kind of limping every so often, but before she could *blink* , he rushed up behind the man and slammed him into a wall. Makoto thought it was best to hang back, but when the girl started screaming at him, she felt obligated to help.

She didn't want to talk and screw something up, so she simply stood between the girl and her dad. The young woman huffed at her, but Makoto assumed she didn't want to mess with a *cop* . It oddly made her feel powerful.

"Get the fuck off of me."

"Snagging another pretty girl, I see."

The man in her dad's grasp groaned loudly. "The fuck you want, Sanada? I thought you were dead."

She swore her dad laughed. "Yeah, and I thought you had a wife."

Hearing that, the girl in front of her grew bright red, then made a move towards the man. Makoto at least was able to restrain her, even if her screams were *deafening* . "You little piece of *shit!* How *dare* you! I'll kill you!"

Makoto didn't really know what to do, but the irate woman was starting to claw and kick and overall *annoy* her. So, when she slapped her across the face and called her a little *bitch* , Makoto snapped. She pushed her shoulder into the woman's chest, grabbed her wrist, and soon pushed her into a wall next to her supposed "boyfriend".

"Assaulting a police officer is a felony, you know."

Makoto regretted it. Her dad told her not to talk, but she was pissed. Her face hurt. She was pretty sure her arms would have cuts from where the woman clawed at her. But, instead of a glare or a snappy comment, her dad smiled at her.

"Fitting in well, I see."

Her face burned.

"Now," her dad said as he rammed the guy back into the wall. "You know the deal. I'm looking for a Shujin student who's been seen in the area. What do you know?"

Makoto tightened her grip on the woman while trying to zone in on the conversation next to her. "I don't know shit."

"Oh. Okay." That was when her dad pulled out the handcuffs and tightened them on his wrists. "We can chat back at the station."

"Fine, fine!" The man twisted next to her, but her dad was a lot stronger than she gave him credit for. Even if he was hurt. "I saw a girl. Once. Maybe twice. She hangs out with that fuckin' Tsukasa, but that's all I know!"

Makoto almost broke the rule about not smiling, so she had to bite her lip. *Perfect* . Not only did he confirm that someone from Shujin was in the area, he gave them another lead.

Maybe her dad knew who this Tsukasa person was. He sure seemed like he knew *something* . But, he released the man and removed the handcuffs, then grabbed him by the collar of his shirt. "If I see you out and about with another girl you're going to sell off, I'll make sure to drag your ass through the streets and into your

wife's office so she can know the kind of man she married."

The man growled, but the next second, he pushed past her and the other woman and stormed off. Her dad's sigh caught her attention again. "You should be a little more careful about who you're spending your time with."

The woman glared at her dad. "Fuck you!" Then *she* stormed off.

Makoto shot a glance back to him. "Why was she mad at you? You saved her."

"Some people don't realize they're in trouble until it's too late." His smile the next second made her blush. "Kind of like how someone didn't learn to stay away from the stove until she burned her hand."

Makoto turned her back on him. “S-So, do you know who this Tsukasa is?”

She looked back over her shoulder when his hand grabbed at her wrist. "We've done enough for today. Your mom is going to start worrying. I know enough people here and at the station to look into this. So *please* stay out of trouble. Okay?"

"So you *do* know who he is?"

He released her arm with a frown. "Yeah. By reputation only. So if you find out who this girl is, you can try and talk to her and tell her to stay away from him.”

She held her breath. “And if not, we can come back?”

He pulled at the bill of her cap and she stumbled into him. “Maybe after you’ve done a little more studying, trainee.”

Despite his rules, Makoto found herself smiling the entire way back home.

Chapter 101

Chapter 101

Sae had never felt more insecure in her entire life, and she *hated* it.

There were looks from her colleagues that she had ignored so many times in the past, but suddenly, they made her skin crawl. She knew *why* they were giving her glares and angry scowls. She knew why they all stopped their chit-chat when she came into the room, then started whispering behind her back. The director, and even Akechi, told her it was fine, everything was *fine* , everything would *be fine…*

She was falling apart. Her mind. Her pride. So everything was *not* fine.

It angered her more since she blamed herself because she was still sitting on the fence. Mitsuru clearly had no faith in her good morals anymore. Her own *mother* disapproved of her. Akihiko sure as hell wouldn't be swinging by any time soon given the situation he was in. Her coworkers blamed her for everything. The public probably blamed her for everything. So why the hell was she still *caring?*

At least she still had Makoto. But that made her angry, too. Sae would bet her little sister would love anyone as long as they were respectful to her and people in general. Why would Sae be special? She thought Minako's recent visit would have let Sae finally close all the doors on her family, but when Amada told her that Kishita was at the school with Makoto, she didn't even *blink* …

And now, back in the comfort of her own office, she asked herself *why?*

She's your sister…

Makoto was always the troublemaker. Makoto knew when her parents weren't watching and knew what to get into that would make the biggest mess. That curious spirit never died as she got older, which was why Sae told herself Makoto needed the extra eyes. She

drew a target on her back for Kamoshida. She charged into Kaneshiro's bar with barely a warning. She associated with criminals like Amamiya. And trouble seemed to find her when she wasn't finding it herself.

It all made her *jealous* . She hated that Minako and Akihiko never let Makoto pay the price for her naivete. Sae may never have found herself in those dangerous situations like her sister did, but she faced her own fair share of trouble. And where were *her* parents at?

Even when she was living at home with them, no one bothered with *her* . Sae even tried to run away when she was a first year to see if they would even notice. Or if Akihiko would come after her like she knew he would for Makoto. She sat at school for the longest time, planning where she would go and how long she could last on her own. Everything had been all set when she walked out of the school, until it started to pour. Rain hadn't been something she thought about.

She figured it wasn't a big deal to try again another day…

"Sis! You're really wet! Here, let me get you a towel!"

It wasn't Akihiko that kept her from running away a week later. It wasn't Minako. It was that little girl with bright eyes and her Buchimaru blanket that she pulled from her bed and tried her best to wrap around her shivering form.

"Buchi always keeps me warm, Sis! Buchi will keep you warm, too! I'll tell Mom to make you some soup, okay?"

Makoto was the only reason she was hanging on to anything anymore. She always had been. Even when Sae wanted to wrap her hands around her neck and strangle her, she would murder anyone who dared to hurt her little sister.

She was furious that Kishita had gone after Makoto, but she didn't know why he did. Thankfully, him and the commissioner had strayed clear of her since the failed interrogation, but she knew they were up to something in the silence. Going after her sister had been something she figured they *might* do, but they were very brazen to

attempt to arrest Makoto without word getting back to her. Was it to get back at her for releasing Akihiko after they had threatened her? Was this their next best option? Did that mean their threats from before were baseless?

Or, were they going after Makoto to shake up Akihiko more than he already was, since going after Sae wouldn't have made him *blink?*

And now she was angry again.

There was a light tap on her door, but Akechi popped his head in without permission to enter. "I'm sorry to disturb you Sae-san, but… I'm afraid we need to talk."

She did *not* have the patience to deal with him at the moment. "Go talk to someone else."

He ignored her and stepped into the room. "I just…there's been some *disturbing* rumors going around lately…"

Akechi *really* knew how to get under her skin and annoy her. She didn't stop him as he crossed the small room and took a seat in a chair in front of her desk. She leaned back in her seat, crossed her arms over her chest, and frowned. "If this is about how people are upset with you for your disapproving stance on the Phantom Thieves, I'm going to kick you out."

His eyes darted around the room. It was odd to see him so nervous. Unless he really had thought she would listen to his troubles like she was his *friend* … "Please understand that I am not going to judge you or show any disrespect towards you if it's true…"

"Akechi." She hated when he did this stupid little stalling game of his. He did it on purpose. "Stop stalling and tell me why you're bothering me."

He sighed deeply. He hesitated. He sighed again. "Um, is…is Sanada your father?"

His question literally took the wind out of her. While Sae had been caught off guard the first time the accusation had been brought up, she did *not* expect to hear it from Akechi. "W-What?"

He held up his hands. “I apologize for giving into petty talk, but it would really explain a lot about why he’s taken such an interest in your sister.”

Of course.

Akechi wasn’t asking because Akihiko had tipped him off by associating and caring too much about *her* . He was asking because Akihiko hovered over Makoto like a shadow, a pestering *father* , and Makoto was her *sister.*

“It would honestly explain a lot about why he grows nervous when your name is brought up.”

Sae slammed her hands against her desk. Akechi jumped in his chair. “Don’t you *ever* refer to *that man* as my *father!* Do you understand me?”

Akechi swallowed and nodded his head. “Sorry…”

But she was boiling again. How Akechi managed to hear the idea, she could guess, but why he chose to bring it to *her* , she had no idea. It didn’t really matter. If it truly was a rumor floating around, more and more people would know about it. More and more people would be questioning her. More and more people would be thinking *that* was why she was *kind* to him and kept him out of prison all the time.

She heard Akechi chuckle lightly, and she almost grabbed him around the collar and flung him out the window.

“I know what it’s like to hate family. Badly enough you want to *kill* , but revenge is always best served slowly, yes?”

That got Sae to focus back on the teen in front of her instead of her rage. “What?”

He waved a hand in front of his face with a grin. “I’m sorry. Don’t mind me. It angers me sometimes when I see parents shunning their children. I’m not saying I believe the rumors, but just know this. We are on your side, Sae-san.” His eyes were brimming with determination. “No one should be allowed to use their children as an

excuse to do whatever they want."

Sae's first retort was to remind him that Akihiko was *not* her father, but the flash of anger on his face gave her pause. She knew very little about Akechi and why he had chosen to follow her around, but she was suddenly curious as to his background. He sure as hell seemed to be faring better than she was, *if* he was in a similar situation.

But to hate family enough to want to *kill?* Granted she *hated* Akihiko, but…

"My apologies, Sae-san." Akechi pushed himself up off the chair and stood, then bowed his head. "Regardless of if Sanada is your father or not, he shouldn't be using the respect you have shown for him previously to get away with the crimes he's been allowed to get away with. We are doing all we can to build your case against him. And I hope the next time you arrest him will be the last."

He bowed again, then turned and walked out of the room. Sae stood still for the longest time, trying to digest the information that Akechi had left her with. Why had he said all of that to her? Why was he so *angry?* Had Akihiko done something to him personally and now he was out for his head, too? Sae would be very curious to know what had happened if that was the case…

Or maybe Akechi was just a big baby and pissed because no one liked him anymore since he was so negative about the Phantom Thieves…

Or maybe *that* was why Akechi was starting to hate Akihiko. Because Sae knew with every part of her body that Akihiko *knew* something about the Phantom Thieves, but he kept slipping out of their hands before he could crack…

By the time she decided to call it a day, her head was pounding, it was dark out, and she could have fallen asleep at her desk. It was a perfect time to leave the courthouse. No one was really out and about at the hour she was walking around. There were no stares, no whispers, no chances to run into Akechi or the director or anyone else that wanted to talk about everything that got under her skin.

She didn't say a word to any of the security guards as she pushed open the door and stepped out into the crisp, cool September evening. It felt wonderful. The air was nice. The silence was nice, if slightly intimidating with a city the size of Tokyo. But the thought of a long bath made her so much more desperate to get home.

Sae thought it was bizarre how quiet the streets of Kasumigaseki were. It wasn't unbelievably late. She had left the office much later and never felt this isolated. She was able to shake the feeling until she walked across the street to head towards the station. It felt colder all the sudden. Was it going to rain? She shot a look up to the sky, but the lights made it hard to tell if the moon was out or not, so she couldn't be sure…

She groaned beneath her breath. It would be nice to have a day off, just to sleep and eat something *real* and sleep some more. Standing at the light for too long probably had her mind shutting down and that was why she felt like she was going crazy.

The feeling didn't go away, even when she was across the street and walking again. In fact, it only got worse. Sae knew a few steps later exactly what she was feeling.

Someone was following her.

It was a weird instinct of hers, being able to tell when eyes were on her when they weren't supposed to be. She wouldn't call herself *paranoid* by any means, but the last few days had left her thinking it was only a matter of time before this started happening again. Her mind started firing, started plotting ways to trap the bastard who dared to try and intimidate her. There were a few alleyways on her way to the station, but if the person was smart, they would know what she was doing.

So she didn't stop and turn into the station when she could have. She just kept walking. Oddly enough, less and less people were out and about the farther she walked. Lights were flickering every so often. She swore she felt a raindrop on her head. Little *distractions* .

Another station. She would walk to another station, or circle back around and take her line back home. If she spotted a hidden

restaurant or convenience store down an alley, she would turn down it. She *had* to catch someone. If she caught them, she would *love* to showcase her physical fighting abilities and pummel them. Hell, it would probably be better than that bath and day off.

And that was what she did. There was a tiny lantern down a darkened alley that brightened her up, even if it was now starting to sprinkle. She was tempted to stop inside and pick up something to eat, since it smelled wonderful, but she had other things to think about. The alley wasn't very long, but long enough for her to hopefully drag her "friend" along as she rounded another corner to wait for them. There had been one other couple she passed, but they were walking toward her as she came in. The next person who came around the corner would be her victim…

She'd been in this situation before, years ago, but the man was no match for her. The police that came to make the formal arrest on him had even been surprised she managed to take down a guy almost twice her size. And loathe as she was to admit it, had Akihiko never pushed her to learn self-defense, she probably would have been killed or kidnapped or…

She flattened herself against the wall when she heard footsteps. The lighting made it hard to tell where the person's exact position was, but she was ready. A hook to the face, a knee to the stomach, and a twist of the arm to throw them on their back. They'd be out. She hadn't lost a fight before, and she sure as hell didn't plan on losing one now.

The footsteps were louder, closer. Whoever it was sure needed lessons on *stealth.*

Her heart pounded painfully.

She tightened her fist.

The second she saw a shadow, she lifted her hand. The second she knew where to aim for the perfect hit, she didn't hold back.

Her punch almost knocked them over, but when Sae went to grab an arm to pull them back towards her, she stopped. Instead, she just

stood there, frozen, unsure of what to do.

“That was a hell of a punch…”

But…why in the world was Akihiko following her? Did Makoto tell him about being cornered by his boss and he suddenly felt obligated to stick his nose into *her* life? Had her punch hurt him? There was no way he was fully recovered yet…

“W-Why are you…”

She watched him wipe the blood from his mouth, but when his eyes met hers, she wanted to walk down the alley and get on a train and take a full month off work.

“What are *you* doing?”

His tone allowed her to at least shake off her surprise and find her voice. “You scared the hell out of me.”

The lighting was dim, but she could see a bruise under his eye that looked painful. Now he would have another one on his face. “Sorry. I was doing some late night stuff at the office, since certain people weren’t around, but then you walked right past the train station and I didn’t know where you were going.”

Sae felt the anger start to build in her heart. “You’re following me now?”

He stared back at her blankly, then broke eye contact and dropped his gaze to the ground. “I swear I wasn’t following you. I mean, I saw you leave, but it wasn’t until you walked by the station that I thought something was wrong.”

“So you followed me?”

Akihiko sighed and wiped at his jaw again. “I guess you could say that then.”

Sae grabbed him by his collar and yanked him into her face. “You’re lucky I didn’t treat you like I would have treated anyone who was caught stalking me!”

He winced a little, which made her release him. “I’m sorry…”

Now she was pissed. She had been all worked up about a *criminal* following her and it turned out to be *nothing* . She was even *more* angry that he had the audacity to assume something was wrong with her and follow her around, like he actually *cared* .

She should have hit him harder.

“Do you want me to walk you home?”

Sae blinked. Did she seriously hear him ask if she *wanted* him to walk her home? Or was she seriously losing her mind? “What?”

He rubbed at the back of his neck, which annoyed her, then he lowered his head. “I know you’re angry with me. And I know I freaked you out. But I don’t think what you were feeling was *me* . So if you were worried enough to plan an attack like this, I just want to make sure you get home okay.”

Oh, she wanted to deck him again. Maybe her earlier hit had knocked something loose in his head. “I hate you. Why the hell would I want you to take me home?”

“Then, at least to the station. That shouldn’t be too weird, since I need to get home, too.”

She would rather be trapped in an alley with a mad man who was trying to kill her...

A sigh. “Alright. But here.”

Sae felt something on her shoulders. It was warm. It was nice. When the hell had she gotten so *cold?* And when had she zoned out to the point she didn’t even know it was *raining?*

“Buchi always keeps me warm, Sis!”

Akihiko smiled at her, but she was far too drawn into herself to comment on how much she *hated* it. “Get home safe, Sae.”

It wasn’t a Buchi blanket, but she wouldn’t admit to *anyone* that

Akihiko's jacket made her feel much the same way. Yes, she was freezing, and the jacket made her warm. That was easy enough to explain away. It wasn't like it was a nice *gift* from a *father* that *loved* her…

She hated him. Always making her go from one end of the emotional spectrum to a place she thought she would have wanted to be *years* ago but was too late for that now…

But then she felt cold again. She pulled the jacket around her tighter, thinking maybe it was the wind…

"I've been looking for you."

Chapter 102

Chapter 102

“I’ve been looking for you.”

Akihiko was beyond relieved that his knee was *killing* him (he blamed the weather) and he hadn’t been able to wander too far away from Sae. She had looked *terrified* when she hit him, like she honestly thought someone was following her. He knew the feeling; the cold, sinking, time-stopping motions that told the body danger was nearby. He almost chalked it up to Sae being tired and not expecting to see him, but it wasn’t *him* she had sensed, but *danger* .

And now danger had reared its face in the form of a *human* .

“Can I help you?”

He did his best to remain hidden around the corner, but Sae’s quiet voice was making it hard not to turn the corner and *murder* someone. The voice sounded familiar, but with the throbbing of his jaw, his other injuries, and his *knee* , it was hard to think of where he had heard it before.

“You can, actually.”

Silence.

Sae wasn’t one to stay *quiet* when upset and caught off-guard. He couldn’t really take a peek around the corner and chance being caught and Sae taking the brunt of the surprise. But without a visual or someone talking, he had no idea what was happening.

Well, nothing *good* …

“Where’s Sanada?”

His only other plan of attack was to leave Sae with whoever wanted *him* and find a way around to sneak up behind them. Assuming that

they didn't *leave…*

Sae had yet to say anything, which he found terrifying in its own way, but he didn't have another option at this point. Once he rounded the corner, his comment got caught in his throat.

The man had a gun, yes, but the man holding the gun was the man he had been trying to find for *months* . The scar across his nose and under his eyes had to be from when his glasses were smashed into his face back in Kaneshiro's club. However, the gun wasn't aimed at him, so he had to tread carefully.

"Let her go."

The man didn't seem to have any interest in Sae, which did wonders for his heart, but the gun didn't change directions. There was quite a bit of distance between the gun and Sae, and even as Akihiko slowly approached them, nothing happened. He figured if this guy wanted him *dead* , he would have shot him by now. The alley didn't offer a lot of room to move around and avoid a bullet…

"Always count on you to rescue your children, yes?"

Akihiko felt his hands clench at his side. He thought he heard Sae curse under her breath. "He's not my father."

He narrowed his eyes at the man standing across from them once he was able to come between the gun and his daughter. "What do you want?"

The man snickered at him. "Your blood is what I want."

Akihiko carefully watched the movements of his hand, his finger on the trigger, and used one of his own to grab behind him to find Sae's wrist. Just in case he needed to dodge. He was relieved she didn't fight him off. "You've had a lot of time to take it."

The man's eyes narrowed, but the gun still remained in the air. "I said *I* want your blood. But I'm not here *for me* . Or I would have put a bullet in your leg, killed your daughter, then put a thousand more bullets through your heart, your head, until I knew for a fact you were *dead* ."

His grip tightened on Sae's wrist. "So what are you here for then?"

Finally, the gun fell to his side. Akihiko thought he was going to be sick now that the pressure had left his chest. He took a few deep breaths, then turned his head over his shoulder when Sae pulled her hand from his.

"If you just want me, she can go, yeah?"

The man studied him for longer than necessary, then clicked his tongue. "I know where you live, Sanada. You can't tell the police, because we *are* the police. And then both you *and* your father, and your pretty little *sister* are dead, too."

It took him a second to realize the man wasn't speaking to *him* , but then the rest of what he said struck him like a bolt of lightning.

"If you think I'm going to let you anywhere *near* my sister, *you'll* be the dead man!"

Akihiko actually had to grab Sae's arm again to stop her from doing anything stupid. Not that he could really talk about doing *stupid stuff* with a man wielding a gun, but thanks to Sae, he was able to focus his anger on keeping her restrained. "It's alright, Sae."

"Sparing your daughter the same fate that winded up costing you a leg, huh?"

If he was close enough, Akihiko would have lunged for him, regardless of if he had a weapon or not. "Yeah. Since it's *still* burning like a bitch."

Sae was literally shaking behind him, so the quicker he could figure out what this guy wanted, the quicker she could get home and out of the rain and the cold.

"I'm not afraid of you, you bastard."

While he was impressed with Sae's spirit to protect her sister, Akihiko didn't want her to say much more in case it ended *badly* . Either now, in ten minutes, or by the end of the week. "Alright. It's late. It's cold. You have me, so she can go."

“I’m not leaving-,”

He held up a hand to stop her. “Please.”

The man nodded his head, which was a surprise, but then the gun was pointed back at him. “Like I said, I’m not the one who wants to meet with you. But we need to go for a little walk first. Your daughter can go home.”

Akihiko heaved a sigh of relief, but Sae grabbed a hold of his arm before he could follow behind the man in front of him. “You can’t be serious?”

He was touched at her concern. “I’ll be fine.”

“Let’s go, Sanada.”

Sae didn’t let him go. “He’s going to kill you, you know that, right?”

He tried not to think about it, but what Sae didn’t know was that if his death kept her safe, he would die for her in a heartbeat. “Well,” he said quietly as he gave her one last look. His heart cracked seeing the fear in her eyes, but he knew better than to comment on it. “I hope you’ll be in charge of my case then.”

It was hard to walk away from her, but he knew his friend was growing impatient and likely had no qualms about killing Sae if he pushed him long enough. The man said nothing to him, but waved the gun in his face for intimidation.

“I’ll kill you if you try anything, and then I’ll kill your children. No hesitations.”

Akihiko had to throw his hands into his pockets or he would have tried to kill the man in the alleyway. Neither of them said anything, but they both kept their eyes on the other. The alley was narrow, so they were practically walking side-by-side, but Akihiko never lost sight of the gun. He did, however, put too much pressure on his knee as he was walking and stumbled into the wall.

“Walk much, Sanada?”

Akihiko pushed himself off the wall and tried to ignore the pain. “No thanks to you, buddy.”

The man only chuckled and walked slowly next to him as he limped down the street.

Then, he chuckled again. “I’m curious to know what beautiful woman managed to give *you* two beautiful daughters.” Akihiko felt his eyes on him and it was much more difficult to keep himself from slamming the man into a wall. “Once I kill you off, I’d love to have any one of them squirming underneath me in bed.”

Akihiko was a little slow on the attack. The man smiled at him with the gun pressed over his heart. “The boss would be pretty pissed if I put a hole through your heart this early on, but I’ll do it. I won’t warn you again.”

Instead of a *pop* of a gun, the man kicked at the side of his knee, the pain powerful enough to knock him over. “Get up, Sanada.” He could barely hear his voice. At this rate, he wouldn’t be able to walk normally ever again. “Get up, or I’ll make good on my earlier threat to go after your daughter.”

Over my dead body .

It took him longer than he thought to get back up on his feet, but then the gun was right back in his face. “Which one do you think would like playing *rough?”*

If he ever saw this man again, threat or no threat, he would kill him. He would go to jail and not have a damn care in the world. “They’d both murder you first.”

Thankfully, before he threw up, the conversation ended. In fact, the next time the man spoke was when he led Akihiko to a black car that reminded him much of Mitsuru’s. The man pulled the door open, waved the gun, then glared at him.

“Get in.”

Great. So now he was probably being kidnapped. And Sae was probably right.

But, Akihiko did what he was told and stepped into the car. He hoped whoever was waiting for him inside didn't laugh at the fact he used the handrail to help, because heaven forbid this day get any worse for him. Oddly enough, once the door shut, Akihiko realized that the man with the gun did not get in, and that there were only two other men in the car besides the driver.

One he didn't recognize.

The other, he did.

Masayoshi Shido.

Fuck.

"You're a lot weaker than I thought you would be."

There was quite a bit of room in the cab, so he stretched out his leg to hopefully numb the fire in his knee. "Well, that's what happens when someone puts a bullet in your leg." He sighed, trying to enjoy that at least his seat was very comfortable. "Didn't expect the VIP treatment after being held at gunpoint for a few blocks."

Shido, who was sitting off to the side, chuckled, but Akihiko wasn't amused. "I do apologize for the trouble. I just wanted to finally meet you."

"Oh?" Yeah. He could fall asleep if he wasn't in so much pain. "You couldn't, oh, I don't know, come visit me in my office? Or are you only allowed to show your face on television?"

The man next to Shido leaned forward, but Shido held up a hand. "Perhaps that would have been more polite, but you do understand that a politician being in a police building does him no good according to the press."

"Only those with something to hide feel that way, I'm sure." Shido lost his smile. It made him chuckle. "Look, sorry for the hostility, but you *did* kidnap me, so it's to be expected."

Shido moved his glasses up on his nose. "I'm sure you have your questions for me, just as I have my questions for you." The smile

came back to his face. “I’ll even let you go first.”

How generous .

The third guy kept staring at him with narrowing eyes. Akihiko wasn’t easily intimidated, but given the situation, who he was with, not being able to *see* where he was, a tiny bubble of fear planted itself in his stomach. He knew for a fact that either Shido was going to have him killed, or taken away from Tokyo, or let go with a threat. There was no way in hell he was walking out of there in one piece with the *honest* answers he needed.

“Alright.” His hand moved on reflex to grab at his pen and notepad, but he then realized it was in his jacket. Sae had his jacket. Hopefully she was out of the rain. He could tell himself she was, to lighten the mood. “I heard you wanted to become Prime Minister?”

Shido gave off a light chuckle, then leaned back into his seat like they were old friends catching up after years of being apart. “I *will* become Prime Minister. People need guidance. Stricter policies. And the current cabinet has been a disgrace to our country.”

“Ah, because of the mental shutdowns?” He wouldn’t mention the Phantom Thieves *yet* , just to see what kind of reaction he got thinking the two cases were different. Shido would know, since he was behind them.

The politician simply nodded. “People are living in fear while those with power refuse to do anything. I am hoping to step up and be the leader this country needs.”

Akihiko had to play his hand carefully. One wrong move would land him the silent treatment *or* being silenced himself. But, if Shido *himself* wanted to meet with him to give him a last warning, he *had* to know what Akihiko was looking into.

Still, he had to admit that this was *not* an interrogation he wanted to have in the backseat of a car owned by a mastermind *criminal* .

So, he said fuck it. Maybe he would at least learn the truth before they killed him. “Did a Wakaba Isshiki disapprove of your platform

and that was why she was killed?”

Shido then took him by complete surprise. He smiled darkly at him, his eyes narrowing behind his glasses. “You think I had her killed, don’t you?”

“Did you?”

The smile turned more *deadly* . “I did.”

Akihiko sure as hell hadn’t expected him to be so open about it. It clearly showed on his face when Shido started laughing. “It was an odd turn of events. I knew what her lab was doing, and I was curious to see the results for myself. It started out with a selfish request to eliminate a tattle-tale, but it worked. It didn’t take long for her to know what I was doing. She knew that I was sending someone into that strange world and killing them. She was going to go public with that, and I couldn’t have that happen.”

It was hard to take him seriously, but at the same time, that was *exactly* what Akihiko had thought had happened. “You picked a fine way to kill her…”

“It wasn’t just her, I’m afraid.” His heart clenched in his chest when Shido gave him another twisted smile. “You’ve been looking into your partner as well. He was getting too smart, too prideful. A pity that he had a *shadow* . Both him and Wakaba had a thing for overworking and ignoring their families.”

His hands tightened into fists. He was sure he broke the skin. “You knew my partner?”

“Not personally. Through reputation. But just like Wakaba, he wanted to get in my way.” He chuckled under his breath. “And neither of their children will get the justice their parents deserve, will they?”

It hit him then that Shido was only being so forthcoming because he was going to *kill* him. He wished he had been smart enough to pull out his phone and record the conversation secretly, so *something* could live on and this man could burn at the stake for the crimes he

had committed.

Another thing pulled at him. Tatsu had kids? Why wouldn't he know that about his own partner? Had he had the same line of thinking that got Akihiko in trouble? Did his kids hate him, too? Where would they be at now? Or had Shido just been trying to get under his skin?

"You're scared, aren't you, Sanada?"

He narrowed his eyes at Shido. "If you think I'm afraid of you, you have another thing coming."

Shido leaned forward in his seat. "We all fear death, so it's natural to be afraid. But you misunderstand me. I actually mean *you* no harm."

Akihiko had to laugh at that. "Right. You kidnap me at gunpoint. You admit to *two* counts of murder after they had been ruled a suicide, and that's not counting all the acts of *terror* you initiated to earn the public's favor. You probably hired people to try and kill me, both in this world and this other one. And now you expect me to think we're going to shake hands and be friends?"

Shido fell back against the seat with another disturbing grin. "I do. Because fear tends to make people more… *subordinate* , don't you agree?"

"You honestly think I'll do whatever you tell me to do?" Akihiko laughed again. "You best put a bullet through my head then. Because you've lost your damn mind."

"You must think I'm a fool, being so open and honest with a very smart man, without having some sort of game plan."

His darkening eyes gave Akihiko pause. But thankfully, Shido didn't let him sit and stew for long. "I wanted you to know I did all of this. I want you to go home and think of all those people, those family members, who will never get justice for the dead. I am untouchable. You just seem to be more of a challenge than I anticipated, but I know how to play you."

"Do you now?"

His laugh did nothing to calm his nerves. “I’ll admit, at one point, I was worried you were that *one* person who would outmatch me. You didn’t seem to have a weakness, no matter how long I had my men look into you. But you do have weaknesses, don’t you?”

Akihiko swallowed hard, even knowing that this was likely to happen. “Your point?”

“Not only will you suffer in guilt because you can’t arrest me, you’ll be spending every waking moment of your life worried about your children. Your youngest, oh…what was her name?”

The man next to him didn’t even move, but spoke without hesitation. “Makoto.”

“Makoto, right. I could have had her killed on her way to school, on her way back from school, or walking around Shibuya after buying a new book she was so excited about.”

Do not let him get to you.

“I would suggest that she not take any more out of country trips, or go out alone to Kabukicho, or stay *too* long after school wrapping up student council business. After all, you’re becoming too old and frail to protect her.”

Do not let him get to you.

“You needn’t worry about Sae, however, as she’s a wonderful pawn.”

Akihiko thought he felt his knuckles crack at his side. “She has a good head on her shoulders. She’ll figure you out, too.”

Shido’s eyes narrowed, but his smile widened. “Does she now? If I’m honest, I only need to remind her of who she is, a *Sanada* , and then she’s back to doing what I need her to do.”

And now he was getting to him. “Don’t underestimate her.” Akihiko would have felt the blood on his fingertips if he hadn’t been so damn *angry* . “She knows what she’s doing.”

“I would also suggest you not take that beautiful *wife* of yours out for sightseeing trips in Tokyo or out on any more beach vacations if you truly want to cross me.”

That is what did him in. He was coming to terms with criminals knowing about Sae and Makoto, but not *once* had any of them known about Minako. But as soon as he made a move to *strangle* Shido, his “friend” pulled out a gun from his jacket pocket and pointed it at his chest.

“Sit down, Sanada.”

“Pretty daughters. Pretty wife. I have a number of men who would *love* to get their hands on them. I could even use the money to further my platform, in your honor, of course.”

He was at a standstill. Akihiko knew he was in over his head, but he couldn’t just *give up* . Not when he knew the truth now. Even if he had to find *physical* evidence to back up Shido’s statements, he would. He knew he was guilty. He wouldn’t *rest* until this man paid for everything he had done.

But what would that cost *him?* Just to catch *one* corrupt adult with so many friends and so much money that he wouldn’t stand a chance anyway? What was the point?

Shido smirked at him, likely knowing he had won. Hell, Akihiko knew he *had* , but wouldn’t give him the pleasure. “Here’s my deal, Sanada. You end your ridiculous and pointless investigation of me, and so long as I don’t find you sniffing around again, I’ll leave your family alone. But *one* false move is all it will take. Makoto will be sold to the highest bidder. Minako might go with her. And I’ll keep using Sae until I have no more use for her.”

His breath left him in a mad rush. This is exactly what he always wanted to avoid, but here he was, being *blackmailed* by a man that had the ability to silence him. Shido seemed like he was waiting for him to seal the deal, and between hearing his family being named off one by one and the pressure making it impossible to *breathe* , he didn’t have the strength to care.

Shido didn't end his threat there. "You speak to your friends at the station, and I'll know. Because I *am* the police. They serve *me* . You so much as walk in there and speak to someone, I'll know."

It was the hardest decision of his entire career to make. "Fine."

The car finally came to a stop. Akihiko had no idea what time it was, how long they had been driving, how *far* they had driven… The other man got out of the car, slammed the door shut, then opened the door next to him. The gun, naturally, was pointed back in his face.

"Get out."

"I suggest you retire soon, Sanada." Shido gave him one last brilliant smile, then waved kindly to him. "I'm sure your wife would appreciate that. You could take her to all the places she's always wanted to go with you."

As soon as he was out of the car, he was struck on the side of the head and collapsed to the ground. He couldn't see well, but he could tell he was in the middle of nowhere, in a puddle of water, and probably alone. The pain rendered him immobile, but he was alive, for now, just with a serious concussion.

"Oh, happy birthday, Sanada."

The sound of the car door slamming shut was enough to push him the rest of the way into unconsciousness.

Chapter 103

Chapter 103

She hated feeling like everything was slipping away from her.

It made it hard to do anything. She hadn't cooked a meal for her family all week. She had barely said five words to either Akihiko or Makoto. She ignored her phone most days. All she really did was sit in bed, wonder why she was so *pathetic,* then mope to herself about a variety of topics.

Sae hated her. That was the big one. She was a terrible mother. No matter what Akihiko would tell her, it wasn't enough. She could put on a front for his sake, but sooner or later, he would *know* . And right when she thought she could do something to *help* , like a *good* mother would, she couldn't. She couldn't fight through the pain and the pressure to find her *damn* answers so she could save Sae. She was a *failure* …

It didn't help that Akihiko seemed to be keeping more to himself recently. Minako was slightly angry with him for never being around, given he was *injured* , but she didn't have the heart to stop him. She also didn't want him around to see her being sad and upset or she would grow *more* sad and upset and likely say something that would blow up in her face.

Makoto was off doing her own thing, like a big girl. And big girls didn't *need* their mothers anymore…

Yukari was really the only person she spoke to, as little as that was. She pestered her and annoyed her with constant calls and texts until Minako finally picked up or responded. They had a lunch date that week, and it was nice to get out of the apartment. Yukari had been more reserved than Minako had ever seen her, but at least she didn't poke *too* much into her fake cheery smiles and tones.

But Akihiko remained distant, usually only saying goodnight to her before he went to bed, if she was even awake. Makoto had been a

mix of emotions, but she felt every time she saw her, Makoto was too afraid to talk to her.

And like every other time in her life, it took a slap to her face to pull her out of her funk.

Minako sat in her room, tossing over her thoughts *again* when she heard Makoto knock on her door. It had been the first time her daughter went out of her way to speak to her, so she knew better than to ignore it. She pushed herself up off the bed and opened the door.

She was greeted with a smile. “Will you help me?”

There was an odd glint in her eyes that made her extremely curious. “Help you with what?”

“Dad’s birthday dinner!”

So she could add being a horrible *wife* to that list of things she hated about herself at the moment. Not that Akihiko was big on celebrations or wouldn’t mind a simple *happy birthday* , Minako *completely* forgot. Had Makoto not said anything, she would have said *nothing* .

Makoto continued to wait patiently for her to move, so Minako nodded her head to clear her mind. “Y-Yeah. I’ll be more than happy to help.”

Her smile widened as she took off down the hall towards the kitchen. What exactly Makoto was planning, she hadn’t a clue, but Minako knew that if she was trying her hand at beef bowl, Akihiko was going to be *very* disappointed.

Unless she helped.

But when Minako stepped into the kitchen, the ingredients laid out on the countertop were far from anything that went in beef bowl. “So. What are you making?”

Oddly enough, Makoto didn't make a move to start doing anything. "We always make Dad pancakes for dinner!"

Right. She knew that. It was something they all started doing when Makoto was old enough to tell her father that she didn't like beef bowl and would prefer pancakes, so she could sneak in more sugar. Minako liked to make his with more *protein* sources, which Akihiko very much approved of, while Makoto made their batch much sweeter. It was a win-win, and she doubted Akihiko even *knew* they had two separate batches.

Minako figured she had made it this far. She would only cause more heartache if she left Makoto alone to do something wonderful for her dad.

"Well then, let's get to work."

Not even ten minutes had passed and Minako found it hard to breathe. Makoto had yet to say anything to her while she worked on her project. Minako cast a glance to her to try and read her expression, and that was when she saw a frown.

"Something wrong?"

She couldn't deal with losing both of her daughters because of her… "Well, um…c-can I be honest?"

Makoto didn't stop stirring her ingredients to see her nod. "Of course."

"I don't like seeing you like this." Makoto then turned to her once she put the bowl down on the counter. "You're usually so cheerful and happy, but this week, you've been sad and depressed. And…And I thought, m-maybe it was something I did…"

Her breath left her in one, painful rush. "Why do you think that?"

Makoto's eyes fell to the bowl before her. "I-I don't know."

"Makoto," she started quietly, leaning into the countertop for stability. "Sometimes I just… *panic.* You're growing up. Sae wants nothing to do with this family. Your dad is hiding something. And sometimes it's

just…overwhelming."

Makoto took a step closer to her. "I thought you wanted me to grow up?"

She let out a breath of laughter. "I do. I really do. But it's scary at the same time. Sae made it very clear that she wanted to leave long before she did. But even then, I still had you. But once you leave, I'll have no one."

She watched Makoto's head drop. "Is something happening with you and Dad?"

Minako took a deep breath, which made Makoto look up at her with worried eyes. "No. We're fine, honey. But I don't love him the same way I love you. So as long as you promise me that you'll be safe and happy, we will be happy, too. Okay?"

There was a hint of a smile on her face as she made a move for her discarded bowl. "So be happy, Mom."

It was strange to be the one being cheered up, but seeing the glow from her daughter did just that. "Thank you, Makoto."

They were surrounded by a comfortable silence for several minutes, but eventually, Makoto's voice broke through it. "Um, can I tell you something else…without you getting mad?"

Given the fact Makoto made her feel much better, Minako figured she could allow this *one* favor. "I guess."

"I…I think I know what I want to do when I go to college."

Minako stopped working on her batter and turned to Makoto slowly. "Oh?" The topic had come up once before, months ago, and Makoto told her she hadn't the slightest idea what she wanted to do. Hell, Minako feared that Makoto didn't even want to go to college *at all* . It was her choice to make, but Makoto was smart and could make such a difference in the world if she put her mind to it. Just like her father.

"Dad took me out the other day, and I kind of shadowed him."

Her statement made Minako's brain stop. When in the world did Akihiko go back to work? And why in the world would he willingly allow Makoto to go with him? Was *that* why he was reserved? Because he had gone back to work and didn't want her to know?

"I know the job is scary, and dangerous, but…I don't know. I just feel like the world needs more *good* people…maybe…s-sorry…"

A small smile came to her face. "Why are you sorry?"

Makoto rubbed one of her hands over her arm, a typical nervous habit. "Because it sounds stupid."

Minako put her bowl down and stood beside Makoto. "Honey, if what you're feeling comes from your heart, then it's never stupid. There's nothing wrong with what you said. I actually think it suits you well, following in your father's footsteps like this."

Makoto lifted her head and met her eyes. "R-Really?"

She couldn't resist the urge to hug her. "You remind me so much of him that sometimes, I feel like I've gone back in time and I'm speaking to him when he was younger. But I hope you want this for yourself and not because you think this will please us. Okay?"

She felt Makoto nod against her, then she pulled back. "We should probably hurry or Dad will come home and ruin our surprise."

Minako was pretty sure Akihiko would have been surprised at the thought alone, but, she didn't tell Makoto that.

She actually had so much to say to her, but couldn't fight through the lump in her throat to do so. She was proud of Makoto. She knew her daughter well enough to know that she *was* serious about joining law enforcement, either as a cop or a lawyer like her sister. She thought that maybe that was why she was so happy, because that time with her dad was all she needed to narrow down her path in life. She also knew Makoto would do a wonderful job, perhaps with a little more education. And maybe that's what she realized out on the streets with Akihiko…

Minako felt like she blinked and everything was set up and ready for

Akihiko to walk through the door. Makoto even went as far as shredding random colored paper she found and put it in a bowl by the entryway.

“I don’t think your dad will be all too excited about your homemade confetti, Makoto.”

Her daughter continued to shred paper, despite her warning.

But once Makoto had two bowls filled almost two hours later, Minako felt something poke at her. Akihiko was hard to give a curfew to, but he also knew his limits. He had been gone most of the day. If he had been walking around, he would be in a great deal of pain by this time of day. So unless he was out and about celebrating with their friends, Minako worried that maybe something else held him up.

“D-Do you think we should call him?”

It became more serious when Makoto started to worry. Minako reached for her phone, found his name, and pressed call. She could feel Makoto’s eyes on her as it continued to ring, and ring, and ring…

No answer .

She was about to try a second time when there was a knock on the door. Makoto threw on a smile and ran off to answer it, but Minako knew Akihiko wouldn’t knock unless he was *really* hurt…

“…Sis?”

Minako was on her feet the next second. Sae quickly came into the apartment before Minako could tell her to stay out. Sae likely only came out to rub something in Akihiko’s face, but she sure as hell wouldn’t allow her to.

Until she saw what she was wearing.

Sae’s jacket…

It belonged to Akihiko.

“W-What are you doing here, Sis?”

Sae wouldn’t face her, which made Minako’s heart begin pounding in her chest. “I need your help.”

Oh god, something happened to Akihiko. The world around her started to fade in and out and it was hot and cold and…

“You need my help?”

“I need you to get in touch with Mitsuru. Now.”

Minako finally found the strength to reach for Sae’s arm. She wasn’t wearing the jacket, but holding on to it as it draped over her shoulders. It still broke her heart. “W-Where’s your father?”

Makoto rushed past both of them, but Sae still refused to turn around. She even refused to answer her.

“Sae.”

“I don’t know.”

This time, Minako grabbed at her arm and yanked her around to face her. “Then why are you wearing his jacket?”

There was a look of *terror* in her eyes that made Minako sick to her stomach. “I didn’t know what to do.”

“Sae, enough. Tell me where your father is.”

She was stalling, but the more she tried to be silent, the more Minako started to panic. Was he *dead?* Did Sae watch someone kill him?

“Sae!”

“He was kidnapped.”

Minako thought she blacked out for a second. “Wh-What?” As soon as she regained control of her thoughts, she grabbed at Sae’s shoulders and shook her. “Why didn’t you call the police?!”

Sae pushed her back. “The *police?* You want me to tell *them* , the same people who *beat* him, that he was *kidnapped?”*

The world started to fall apart around her. Would she ever see him again? Was he going to be the same person *if* she saw him again? Would they find his body, or would they find something that belonged to him, or would they find nothing at all? Would they find him today, tomorrow, in a month, or would they never find him?

Sae at least was kind enough to catch her as she felt her knees give out from under her. “I’m sure Mitsuru will be of more help than the police. So as long as Akihiko remains resilient like he has in the past, he’ll be fine.”

It didn’t stop the flow of tears as Sae helped her to the couch. She clung to her, to the jacket she wore, because Akihiko was going to be fine. Just like Sae said. He hadn’t died yet. He would be okay.

“Why didn’t you help him?”

Makoto’s harsh tone snapped her out of her fear. Was she talking to her, or to her sister? “And what was I supposed to do?”

She was aware enough to catch Makoto’s eyes narrow. “You could have *helped* him.”

Sae tried to pull away from her, but Minako wouldn’t let her go. “The man had a *gun* , Makoto. You of all people should know how *that* goes, right?”

“Enough, please…”

Neither of them listened to her quiet plea. “So *now* you want to talk to Mitsuru? Dad’s probably *dead* by now!”

Dead…

“Don’t you *dare* try and tell me this is *my* fault!”

How Minako was able to push herself to her feet in her haze, she didn’t know, but a part of her *hurt* listening to her daughters yell at each other over something that wasn’t anyone’s fault. At least, no

one in the room. “Enough. Both of you.”

Makoto dropped to the couch behind her and sobbed into her hands. She felt bad for her, knew exactly what she was feeling, but her heart hurt more for Sae. Strangely. Just when she had told herself that she would never see or hear from her again, here she was, doing what was *right* for a father she claimed to hate. Then Sae had to deal with Makoto’s fears, and hers, and her own…

Sae turned to walk away from them, but thankfully didn’t walk out the front door. Minako slowly followed after her into the kitchen, trying to keep out that tiny voice in the back of her head that when Mitsuru showed up, it was going to be too late…

“I hate you all…”

Minako felt that crack deepen in her heart. “Your sister is just terrified. She knows it’s not your fault…”

“And what if he’s dead? What are you going to say to me then?”

“Sae,” she said softly, worried taking a step towards her would anger her even more. “I know your father wouldn’t have wanted you to get hurt, so you coming to get help was the best thing you could have done.”

She slammed her fists onto the counter. “I hate you! I hate *all* of you!”

Minako had no idea where this level of anger was coming from, but before she could find the strength to ask her, Sae rounded on her and closed the distance between them. “Akihiko made his decision years ago. You made yours the other day. And now *Makoto* has done the same! All I will *ever* do is disappoint you! All because you would rather stand behind a *coward!”*

She grabbed Sae’s wrist before she could get around her. However, one look into her eyes made Minako look away. Sae was quick to pull her hand out of her grasp. “Give this to Mitsuru if you see her.”

Minako was surprised at her quiet tone, but she quickly reached out for the folded up piece of paper. She didn’t try and ask what it was

as she opened it, and on the paper were numbers and letters she recognized as a license plate. When Sae made a move to walk off, Minako forced herself to find her voice.

“Sae, please. I know you’re scared, and I know you’re angry and hurting, but we would help you if you needed it. We *love* you…”

She thought she heard her chuckle. “But you don’t, do you?”

“Sae…”

Minako gripped the paper in her hands tightly as Sae said nothing more to her and walked around the corner. She let the tears burn her cheeks when she heard the door slamming shut. Why did this have to happen to *her* family? What in gods name had they done *wrong* to piss off whatever spirits gave them such *hell?*

“Mom!”

She literally jumped at the sound of Makoto’s voice, but when she saw her daughter’s tears on her face, she was rudely reminded of the situation. “Where’s Mitsuru?”

Makoto looked down to her phone, then held it up as if to show her the message. What she didn’t tell Makoto was that she couldn’t see anything at the moment… “Mitsuru says they’ve located his position.”

Minako fell over hearing her words. “I-Is he…is he okay?”

“I-I don’t know…” Makoto held her phone tightly against her chest. “She said Fuuka tracked a signal from his watch, I guess? But he’s really far out of town, so…so…”

She had to be strong here. Makoto had tried, but so many doubts and questions remained. So, she walked over to Makoto and pulled her into her, hugging her a little *too* tight. “Your dad has always been a fighter. He’s going to be okay.” She dropped her head to rest against Makoto’s, more so to hide her tears. “He’s going to be okay…”

The two of them stood in the kitchen and cried for the longest time.

The only time they pulled away from each other was when Makoto's phone went off in her hand. Minako wiped at her eyes and looked down at the device between them.

Ken and Junpei are in route to retrieve him.

So now they had to wait even *longer* to know if he was even *alive?*

It felt like hours. Minako had no idea when they had made it to the living room or had sat down. Makoto held onto her hand, to which she was grateful, since it was the only thing that kept her from drowning. Every now and then, Makoto's voice would reach her ears, a silent, yet strong statement that Akihiko was going to be okay. He was alive. Maybe hurt. But he would be back to them tonight, or the morning, or sometime in the very near future…

Again, Minako flinched when she felt Makoto's phone buzzing, but she was quick to lean over to see the message. And this one took her breath away.

Hi Makoto, it's Ken. We found Akihiko. He's okay. Isn't saying much, but he has a pretty nasty gash on his head Mitsuru wants someone to look at. Doesn't remember much, so I'm assuming he has a concussion. Other than that and being a little wet from the rain, he's fine.

Minako swiped the phone from Makoto's hands and didn't waste a second. She *had* to hear his voice, even if he didn't make any sense, even if he was on the verge of unconsciousness and feeling worse than what Ken had made them believe…

Ken at least was nice and picked up the phone. "Hey, sorry, can't talk for too long. I'll give you more details when-,"

"I need to talk to him. *Please!* "

"M-Minako?"

She felt Makoto's hand rest on her arm. She tried to dial her anxiety down a few notches. "I just need to hear his voice. Please."

At first, she thought Ken hung up on her, or had dropped his phone,

or was ignoring her… Eventually, she heard Ken's voice, albeit much quieter, like he was away from the phone…

"Say something to her."

Minako held her breath. She held it long enough that she thought she was going to pass out.

"I-I'm okay…Minako…"

The phone slipped from her hands hearing Akihiko's voice. He was alive. He was okay. He would be returning home to her, to Makoto…

They could celebrate his birthday tomorrow, and she would make sure he got everything he wanted.

After she drowned him in tears.

Chapter 104

Chapter 104

Makoto almost missed her second ever day of school.

Even knowing her dad was alive, she still found it impossible to sleep. The only reason she was able to shut her eyes for the hour or two she did was because she spent the night on the couch with her mom next to her. She did wake up feeling incredibly childish, and had her mother been awake, Makoto probably wouldn't have had the heart to go into school.

She didn't even care how late she would be. She didn't care about anybody's problems like she usually did before class started. She barely had the right state of mind to make sure she even *looked* presentable. All she kept thinking about were the images in her head when Sae had told them their dad had been *kidnapped* .

But then she grew angry.

Makoto knew she couldn't *blame* her sister, but Sae didn't *love* their dad like she did. Makoto would have gladly risked her life to try and help. Sae likely just walked away without a care in the world. While it was nice to know that Sae still cared for her, she couldn't keep believing that Sae's hatred towards a man Makoto loved and respected was *forgivable* anymore.

But her mom sure liked to keep the faith. Even after Sae had watched her dad get beaten for a crime she *knew* he didn't commit, then watch him get taken away by some bad guy, her mom was still forgiving. It felt like Makoto was the only one who would stand up for her dad without cowering under the glare and yells of her sister.

Maybe. Makoto still *loved* her, but…Sae had no right to keep bringing pain and misfortune to their dad like she seemed to enjoy so much…

"Niijima-san."

She didn't register a voice until there was a pressure on her shoulder. She turned her head to see the hand, then the arm, then the face. Makoto recoiled and almost fell back into a wall.

"A-Akechi-kun?"

He smiled kindly at her, but there was something swimming in his eyes. "I didn't mean to startle you. It's just that you're awfully late to class."

What did he want with her? Why did he corner her at the station? Shouldn't he be at school, too? Did he want to rub her dad's kidnapping in her face and see how she would react? Would it be that big of a deal to tell him the truth? Would her dad let her get away with assault if she pummeled him half to death?

"You seem…troubled."

She had to play it cool. She was tired. She had no real idea what path she wanted to follow when she went to college. That was a good excuse. "I've just been feeling a lot of pressure to find a college to go to, and-,"

"You weren't worried about your father, were you?"

Oh. The way he said it made her blood run cold. She was suddenly very aware of how *alone* she was in the station hallway. "W-What?"

"It's okay. I've already learned the truth from your sister." His smile made her clench her hands at her side. "You seem to harbor much more respect for him."

Makoto had to force herself to breathe and remain calm. "I don't understand what you're trying to say."

He waved a hand, but his eyes seemed to grow *dark* . She would have taken a step back had she had the room. "Sae-san takes after your father. You, on the other hand," he said with a tone that made her sick. "You must take after your mother."

It was difficult not to *punch* him. "You're making a lot of assumptions, aren't you?"

“I met her.” Makoto’s stomach twisted into a knot. “She looks a lot like you. The red eyes were a giveaway.”

“What do you want?” she asked with her eyes narrowing. “I need to get to school.”

However, Akechi pushed her back into the wall with a chuckle. “I want you to turn yourself in. Your sister will be very surprised and *humiliated* to learn that her little sister is the criminal she’s been looking for.”

The walls started to close in on her and her entire body tensed with dread. “W-What?”

“You’re a Phantom Thief. Your father has been trying to protect you and steer the investigation on to him. He’s a smart man, but you, not so much.”

She snapped. She grabbed his wrist and pulled him into her and kneed him in the stomach. Before he could catch his breath, she slammed *him* into the wall and held his wrists behind his back. She felt proud when she heard him groan under the pressure. “I would be careful if I were you. My father isn’t the only one who could break you in half.”

When she heard him chuckle, she released him. Before she could walk away, he had to get in *one* more quip. “Does Amamiya find it attractive when you talk like that?”

Makoto walked down the hall and to the platform before she missed the train and she murdered Akechi. However, as soon as she was standing in the cabin, the reality of what had happened hit her like a brick wall. Akechi *did* make her feel trapped, so she could justify *hurting* him, but she admitted to him the truth. She basically confirmed that Akihiko was her dad, which would make Minako her mom. Sae would be *furious* with her, especially if Akechi had baited her into telling him who their parents really were…

But…did he *know* she was a Phantom Thief? How would he know that? Did he know she was dating Ren, or was that just the only person Akechi spoke to besides her?

She didn't want to know how or if he knew…

Makoto *barely* made it to class on time. Her classmates gave her a curious look when she literally ran into the room right before the bell sounded. She continued to feel some of their eyes on her as class continued, but she never once had the ability to focus on the lecture. Her hands were shaking and she could barely keep them steady as she jotted down some random notes. Her heart was pounding in her ears. She had to rub at her eyes like they were dry to make it look like she wasn't about to start *crying* .

The lunch break came at the right time. A few of her classmates at least were kind enough to ask her if she was okay, to which she offered a nod and a small smile before they walked off. She figured she needed to head up to the student council room and resume her role, but the last thing she wanted was to appear inattentive with students who needed someone to talk to…

"Hello, Mako-chan."

Hearing a voice she wasn't used to, Makoto jumped slightly in her seat. When she looked up, she found Haru, her face lit up like it usually was. "O-Oh. H-Hello, Haru…"

"Do you want to have lunch together?"

She didn't think she could eat *at all* , but she knew very little about Haru, even after working together for almost two weeks, and it would be rude to tell her no. "Um, s-sure."

Haru either ignored her stutter and hesitation or thought nothing of it. Both of them were quiet as she followed behind Haru, but Makoto soon realized that she was leading her up to the third floor. They didn't stop until Haru turned to her before opening the rooftop door with another bright smile.

"I do hope this is acceptable."

No one was *supposed* to be on the roof, but she wasn't about to ruin Haru's cheery mood with her negativity. "I-I can allow it…today."

When Haru grabbed her arm, she flinched, but the other girl

continued to drag her out of the hallway. Again, they were both quiet as Haru walked to the far side of the building. As Makoto followed behind her, she realized Haru was standing over a bin of…plants?

“Um, w-what is that?”

Haru lowered herself to kneel next to the plants. “I like to grow vegetables here. I apologize if it’s against school policy, and for never saying anything to you before.”

It was interesting to hear, but Makoto shook her head. “No. It’s okay.”

“I don’t have the ability to grow them at home, you see. Here, the sun is much more suitable. I can also water them during break and before I leave, so they are much happier here.”

Makoto’s heart fell in her chest. “I-I’m afraid I’m not much of a gardener. However, I’m sure they will turn out well.”

Haru turned to her with a laugh. “It’s so nice to finally say this to you. I hope you don’t mind me telling you that I may have been intimidated by you and so I never spoke to you.”

She sighed and grabbed at her wrist. “Y-Yes…I’m sorry…”

“Oh, don’t be sorry, Mako-chan.” Haru pushed herself to her feet. “We’re friends now, right?”

Makoto found herself nodding a little *too* slowly. “O-Of course…”

“And my entire time here at Shujin, I’ve never heard that you were so late to class.”

All those feelings from a few minutes ago came back to drown her. “O-Oh…”

She felt Haru grab both of her hands and lightly tug on them. “Please forgive me for prying, but you seem so troubled. I am more than happy to listen to you.”

Makoto choked out a laugh. “Oh. T-Thank you, but I’m fine.”

That was when she caught something more *menacing* in Haru's eyes. "You're not a very good liar, Mako-chan."

Makoto decided that maybe it was a good time to talk to Haru about what had been eating at her for days. "Then can I ask you something…personal?"

The look was gone in her eyes and another smile spread across her face. Haru didn't let go of her hands. "Of course!"

"A-And please…don't feel obligated to-,"

"Ask me whatever you wish, Mako-chan."

She figured she had come this far, and Haru looked very eager and open… "Your father… Do you hate him, for what he's done to you?"

Haru's smile became less *happy* , but it didn't fade from her face. "My father has been like this for a while now. I will admit that it's hard, but then I remember the man he used to be, so caring and understanding, thinking only of others, and I tell myself it's my duty to bring him back. Because love isn't always bright and welcoming and warm. Sometimes it hurts. But if it's true, you will fight for it, and the hardships will pass. That's what I tell myself anyway."

Makoto took a deep breath to try and cover up the sting behind her eyes. "You're very strong, Haru…"

"Do you have someone you love like that, too?"

It didn't feel right coming out and telling Haru about her sister when she had taken months to do the same with Ren. However, Haru had been open with her. She knew what it was like to love someone who was *wrong.* Plus, Haru didn't seem to be the type of person who would let her walk away…

"M-My sister…" She felt Haru's hands tighten around hers. "She's a prosecutor. And she's been consumed with anger and hatred since I was very young. A part of me can understand it, but recently, she's been out of control and it's beginning to hurt people *I* care deeply about."

She paused to wipe her eyes on her shoulders. “She has a palace. I looked into it months ago. But unlike you, I’m scared to face her. She’s not a bad person. She still loves me and she protects me and she worries about me…”

Haru tugged on her hands again. “It’s okay, Mako-chan.”

But the spicket was open and she couldn’t stop now. “She hated my father so much and he’s been through *hell* for her and she doesn’t even *blink* when he’s beaten in front of her or kidnapped or *suffering* because all she thinks about is how much he’s *deserved* it!”

Haru gave her a moment to calm down, but then she realized what she had said. “Um…I-I’m so sorry…”

Her friend chuckled at her. “Please, don’t be sorry, Mako-chan. I honestly feel like I understand you so much better. It means so much to me that you are comfortable enough to speak like this with me.”

“I-I…I haven’t told the others…a-about my family…”

Another tug made Makoto look up. “Then it’s our little secret! And my tomatoes will be my witness!”

When Haru lifted her arms to give her a hug, Makoto didn’t know what to do. Granted she had hugged her parents, her sister, *Ren* , but Haru was different. She was so full of energy and positivity that it made her *hurt* . Makoto could never be like that. Strong enough to change someone they loved because they needed it. Strong enough to smile through the situation she was forced into by said person she loved.

But it was a nice gesture. She actually *needed* it. “Thank you, Haru.”

When she pulled back, Haru grabbed her hands again with a smile. “Please don’t hesitate to speak to me if you are upset. I may seem happy and cheerful to my peers, but I am not afraid to strike *fear* into someone who hurts those close to me.”

Makoto nodded her head with a light laugh. “And I hope to do the same for you, Haru. Thank you.”

The rest of the school day went by fairly well, thanks to her conversation with Haru. It was nice to get everything off her chest to someone who *understood* her situation. Not that Ren was a terrible person to talk to, but sometimes she felt like it annoyed him. After all, when was the last time they had even hung out after school, just the two of them, and *not* with a meeting first?

Speaking of *Ren…* "Hey you."

She was headed up to the student council room after class when she ran into him. He stood in her way with a cheesy grin that always made her insides burn. "Um…h-hey…"

He chuckled under his breath and grabbed at his bag over his shoulder. "Headin' to work?"

Well, truth be told, it was a habit, but she didn't think there was much to do today. She hoped not anyway. She really wanted to get home and see if her dad was okay or if he was in the hospital and *not* okay. "Oh. I…I um, I always check in before I leave."

"Maybe you should take a day off." He took a step closer to her, but she saw the concern in his eyes. "You look really tired."

But she would *not* keep talking about her family drama with him. Even if he wanted her to. It was annoying. It had to be. Especially when she wasn't *doing* anything about it. "I didn't sleep well last night…"

Ren didn't look like he bought her half-lie, but he made a move for her hand regardless. "Well, I told Sojiro I would help out in the shop today, but I also promised your sister that I would walk you home. So I'll wait for you."

Her head lowered to her chest. "You don't have to."

"Oh, I'd like to live. Plus," he said as he lifted her chin back up. "I really like spending time with you."

She likely burned his fingers and that was why he released her. "O-Oh…"

“Do you not like spending time with me?”

That got her to panic. “W-What? O-Of course I do! I-I just know that-,”

He laughed as he put a hand on her shoulders to stop her. “It’s okay, Makoto. Sometimes I just like to see your blush because it’s so cute and you look sad and tired.”

“I-I see…”

“So go wrap up your business and I’ll meet you downstairs, okay?”

Makoto nodded her head and watched as Ren walked down the hall away from her. It was hard, nearly *impossible* , to tell when he was serious or joking. He was always joking. Very rarely did she see him without a smile, or a *grin* . But was it a front? Had she hurt him, and that was why he had asked if she liked hanging out with him?

She shook her head. The quicker she wrapped up in the student council room, the quicker she could find out about her dad’s health. Plus, Ren was waiting on her, so she *had* to hurry. Hell, if there was stuff to take care of, Makoto would just do it the next day. After all, her council did much the same. Why couldn’t she?

It was her lucky day. The room was undisturbed, papers were put away, and no one was in the hallway expecting her. She quickly shut and locked the door, then practically ran down the stairs. She had to get home. She had to know if her dad was okay. She wanted to *sleep* …

Ren, of course, beamed at her when he saw her approaching. “Skipping work to spend time with me? I’m honored.”

She tried to roll her eyes at him, but he liked to make her face burn and her brain shut off. “L-Let’s go.”

“Yes, my Queen.”

For the walk to the station, they were quiet. Once they were inside, he grabbed her hand and whispered, “I now know you are perfectly safe.”

She wondered if he studied how to *flirt* from books or if he was just that talented. She was too embarrassed to ask. However, her mind quickly shifted from wondering about her dad to her current predicament of being smashed into Ren once they were on the train. He didn't seem to mind, even if he was oddly tense, but she was tense, too. She just hoped he wasn't uncomfortable. There wasn't a lot of room to step away from him…

His heart was racing, if that meant anything.

But there was a change in him once they stepped off the train in Shibuya. Makoto was going to tell him he didn't need to follow her home so he could head home himself, but he looked so… *terrified?* Was he claustrophobic? Had she hurt him somehow?

"Um, Ren?"

He rarely spaced out either. But hearing his name, he snapped back to attention. It took him another second to put a smile on his face. "Let's get you home."

But he didn't make a move for her hand. He put a few more centimeters between their shoulders. He was very quiet and reserved, even if she had walked next to him in silence before.

The train to Ebisu was much less crowded, and again, Ren kept his distance. He didn't smirk and ask her to step into him like he usually did. He didn't drop an arm around her back. He didn't even *look* at her.

The pressure finally made her crack when they both rounded the corner to her apartment. "Um. A-Are you okay?"

It was the first time since they left school that he made eye contact with her. "What?"

"D-Did I hurt you?"

He stared back at her a moment longer, then laughed, likely to cover up his stalling. "Oh. Yeah. Sorry. I was just thinking about how much your sister would kill me if I actually left you at Shibuya."

Liar.

She didn't comment on it, but she sure as hell didn't feel any better. She tried to tell herself that she had poked him in the stomach and he was hurt and that was why he was acting weird. Trying to be tough and not make her feel guilty. Because if she had said something or upset him, he would tell her, right?

"So. Have a good night."

Ren turned to leave, but before he could walk past her, she grabbed his arm. "Y-You don't want a…a goodbye hug?"

It was *always* something Ren asked for. He even asked her to stay behind some meetings once everyone left *just* so he could get one. What happened to make him not want one now?

Her heart cracked when he stumbled to find words. He wouldn't look at her. She understood. "Um, are you mad at me?"

She heard his exhale, but she refused to look up to see his face. "No. I'm sorry. I-I really do want a hug though."

But she stepped back when she noticed him walk up to her. "No you don't."

He was quiet, which was all the more reason she needed to get out of there. But he grabbed her arm when she turned to head inside. "Wait. Please. I-I'm sorry."

She quickly yanked her arm away. "You shouldn't feel obligated to take me home if I make you uncomfortable."

But he grabbed her again. "Look, I'm sorry. And if you promise not to murder me right here, I will be honest with you. But…" She held her breath, but for once, he was the one to look away with a dusting on his cheeks. "I really do like your hugs. But sometimes…it's not enough. And on the train today…I, uh…I might have taken it a little *too* far, you know?"

She glared at him. "No. I don't. If I hurt you-,"

He laughed nervously. “You remember that time in Hawaii when you asked me if I would sleep with you?”

The air around her suddenly grew too thick for her. “Um…y-yes?”

“Please don’t hate me for saying this.” He looked like he was in pain. “But you’re a really pretty girl. And when I hug you or you're pressed up against me like you were, that’s exactly where my brain goes. I would *never* act on it, I swear. Which is why…why I push you away sometimes. And I’m sorry. I really am.”

Makoto stood in front of her apartment building, frozen. She couldn’t even *breathe.*

Ren seemed to notice her reaction and dropped his head. She could barely make out his voice. “I’m sorry, Makoto. B-But, I hope you have a good night.”

He was *so sad* that it snapped her back to life. She had to walk a few steps to catch up to him, but she didn’t physically reach out to him. “Ren?”

He stopped, turned to her slowly, but the sadness in his eyes *hurt* . He didn’t say anything to her, so she had to speak up. “I…I don’t mean to make you feel like that…”

A weak smile came to his lips. It didn’t meet his eyes. “It’s not your fault.”

“B-But…”

“I know we’re both still new to all of this, but I never want to make you feel afraid of me or disgusted by me.”

She held both of her hands in front of her. “I’m not afraid of you.” Then, she swallowed hard, trying not to make him more uncomfortable than he already was. “Maybe it’s nice to know that I affect you as much as you affect me.”

She threw her hands to her face. She could not *believe* she just admitted that to him. They hadn’t even been dating for a full *month* yet! She was an idiot!

Makoto was tempted to run and hide and bury herself under her covers until she *died* , but suddenly, Ren burst into laughter. The sound scared her, but then she had no idea what to do.

“ *That* was probably the cutest and most precious thing I will ever hear.” Makoto’s only true source of comfort came from the fact she could *see* Ren’s blush on his face. “I don’t even know what to say to that.”

Her face was burning, too. “W-Well…I-I meant it…”

That had been hard as hell to say. She even felt extremely nervous as Ren took a few steps closer to her. When he reached for her hand, she almost took off back home. “Thank you, for that. So we’ll take this slow, okay? We have a lot of time together, so we don’t need to rush anything, right?”

His hand moved up her arm until it rested against her back. He was cautious, but he carefully prodded her closer so he could wrap his other arm around her. She noticed immediately that he was relaxed and comfortable, much the opposite of how he had been around her on the train. Now that his admission was out in the open, it was hard *not* to think about what he had been thinking about.

Ren *was* a good looking guy…

Stop that.

“I hope you have good dreams tonight.”

She should probably push him away before *she* did something stupid. “R-Right.” At least she was gentle pushing him away from her. She didn’t need to see his face to know how entertained he was with her burning face. “I-I hope you have g-good dreams…too.”

“I’ll just dream of you and our Hawaii cuddles.”

If her dad didn’t kill Ren first, she was positive Ren was going to kill *her.*

Chapter 105

Chapter 105

One day, he wasn't going to fight the pain and just *die.*

"Aki…"

Even if Minako had been quiet, he flinched at the sound of her voice. His head was pounding, like she was beating him as hard as she could with the heaviest known object to man. He must have made a face, because soon after, he felt something latch onto his hand. She squeezed him in lieu of words, but he figured she would like to hear something from him.

"I…I'm sorry…"

Akihiko coughed to clear his throat. It backfired on him. That pounding just got worse and worse…

A hand landed on top of his head, the gentle brushing of fingers doing *wonders* to relieve the pain. "It's okay."

Gods, he could have fallen asleep. And he thought he was well on his way, until her hand lowered to the gash on his head that sent a spark of pain throughout his body. How in the hell had he suffered that kind of injury from a *fall?*

Minako went back to holding his hand. He tried to comfort her as best he could by squeezing her hand every so often. He knew she would have slapped him had he not suffered a head injury. And truth be told, he did *not* enjoy being slapped when he was in a hospital bed, or when he knew it was because she was terrified…

Everything was quiet for so long that he thought he dozed off. When his mind began to try and recall what had happened, where he was, he tried to force his eyes open and *speak* again. Maybe someone else would know, or know something to get his brain remembering rather than *hurting* …

“This is why I told you to stay away from him.”

His hand was cold. The air felt cold. It served as a jolt to get him to open his eyes as best he could through the blinding pain. They opened the rest of the way when he found Mitsuru standing over his bed.

“He could have killed you. You do understand that, yes?”

The hell was she talking about? “W-What?”

She sighed and rubbed her head in frustration. Minako was nowhere to be found. Had he dreamt of her presence? “We ran the plates associated with the car you were forced into. No matter how hard Fuuka looked into it, nothing came up. Which tells me it belonged to the one person we can’t seem to find at all, yet you keep trying.”

A flash of pain behind his eyes had him wincing. Couldn’t she keep her voice down? “Yeah. I don’t…I don’t know what you’re saying.”

“The next time you even *think* about bringing Shido down, he will murder you.”

Right.

Shido…

Akihiko was sitting up the next second, ignoring the pain that followed. “Minako. Where is she? And my kids?”

Mitsuru was quiet. *Far* too quiet. He suddenly didn’t feel like his head was going to explode anymore. But when he made a move to throw the sheets off and charge out of the room, Mitsuru put a hand on his shoulder to stop him.

“Minako stepped out to get something to eat. Makoto is at school, and Sae is at work.” His relief knocked him back onto the bed. It could have swallowed him up, and it was far from comfortable. “But that feeling you just had, imagine living the rest of your life like that.”

His hands tightened into fists on the sheets. “I couldn’t help getting *kidnapped* .”

“You knew *exactly* what would happen by continuing your investigation.” Her tone of voice infuriated him. “I told you to stop because I knew he was dangerous. He’s far more powerful than I am, Akihiko. He has more people working for him than I will ever know. He has likely had his eyes on you since day *one.”*

“So I’m just supposed to clap him on the back and tell him *good job?”*

She sighed heavily, then lowered herself into a seat next to his bed. “You do your job very well. You always have. But you can’t win every battle. You can’t arrest every criminal. He’s *one* man.”

His fingers dug into the skin of his palms and he thought he drew blood. “He’s *killed* people. He told me he had Isshiki killed, my partner killed, and he’s the mastermind behind-,”

“And *you* will be next if you don’t stop.”

He angrily pushed himself up on the bed. “I would let him kill me, because *no one* is above the law.”

She leaned back with a smug look on her face. It made him *sick* . “But he didn’t threaten your life, did he?”

Defeated, he dropped back down and turned away from her. “No. He didn’t.”

There was a deafening silence that suffocated him. This was what Shido had been talking about. He would *know* the truth, but live knowing there wasn’t a *damn* thing he could do. He was angry. He was frustrated. He was *disgusted* with everything, everyone…

“Akihiko.”

His vision blurred, but whether that was from his headache or the burning in his eyes, he didn’t care. “Yeah. I get it, okay? He won. I won’t go after him again. I’ll spend the rest of my fucking life laying at home not doing a damn thing because why the fuck would I try to

do what's *right?!"*

His hands shot to his eyes. He thought they might have been on fire. "I give up…" Now his throat was on fire. Was he on fire? "I quit. I'm done…I'm…"

It was then that he realized he was hysterical. It sure didn't help his headache go away. He was half-tempted to tell Mitsuru to just *kill* him since he felt like he had lost everything that he was proud of. His family would be safer. Sae wouldn't care either way. Makoto had good friends. He'd put Minako through so much hell already…

A minute or two later, there were a pair of hands on his face, pushing his own out of their way. When he blinked, Minako was sitting in front of him, eyes misted over, yet hardened with determination.

"You're okay, Aki. We're okay. Nothing is going to happen to you, I promise."

Akihiko wanted to contest her, but he gave up on that, too. He fell into her shoulder, trying to search for that light he always needed to find his way out of his self-inflicted chaos. He didn't even realize how tightly he was holding her until she pinched him under his arm so he would release her.

Minako didn't let him pull away from her completely. "Whoever did this to you better not mess with you again. I won't let them. And if I ever find out who this person is, I'll kill them. I will. No one will ever hurt you again."

There was a seriousness in her voice that shook him to his core. Minako very rarely spoke like this. She was angry. She was hurt. And as much as he liked to believe that *he* was the scary one in the family, Minako had her moments where she greatly outclassed him.

But she wouldn't need to worry. It was a cute look on her though. "Thank you, Minako," he said with a forced laugh. He leaned forward and rested against her again. "I hope that once they find out who this guy was, they don't tell you. I'd hate to have to bail you out of jail for murder."

Akihiko shot a glance over to Mitsuru, who stood from her seat after a nod. “Please take some time to rest, Akihiko. We will keep in touch with you.”

As soon as Mitsuru was out of the room, Akihiko made an internal promise that Minako would never find out what happened. He could distract her easily enough, take her out and about to all the sight-seeing places she wanted to go to over a week ago. He could debate about going back to work, or quitting that all together, since he figured that would make Minako very happy…

“I suggest you retire soon, Sanada.”

He still felt like he was too young. He could do more, *help* more, save more people…

Maybe once he left, the world would fall apart, and he could laugh from the sidelines as every single person who tried to fuck him over suddenly realized how *valuable* he had been…

“Are you okay?”

He blinked and the world came back into focus. Minako gave him a concerned look, but he was quick to put her worries to rest. “My head hurts like a bitch.”

She lifted a hand to the side of his head where he was struck. “Maybe you should actually *rest* this time.”

He made his mind up then that he was done. If no one else was going to care, he wouldn’t care. He did his best with the time he had. Now, he wanted to spend however many more years he had left making everything up to the woman he loved so much.

Liar.

“…I’m sure another month off work wouldn’t hurt, right?”

Minako smiled at him and leaned forward to kiss him lightly. “So long as you actually *rest* .”

He didn’t *need* his job. He only needed *her* .

That job made you who you are. You are *your job…*

Thankfully, the doctors knew not to contain him for another night, and he was released a few hours later. They handed Minako a piece of paper for *another* set of painkillers, and while he had enough and hated them to begin with, maybe it would be nice to have. Just in case.

He got quite a surprise when he got home.

Aside from the *crushing* hug Makoto gave him once he was inside, when she pulled him towards the kitchen, he saw the table was already set and ready for dinner. He was *starving,* so that made him happy, but then he got close enough to the table to see what was happening.

“Happy Birthday, Dad!”

The next second, there was a shower of little colored pieces of paper that fell around him. He would have poked fun at Makoto about it, but she looked so happy throwing more of it into the air around him. Minako came up behind him, wrapped her arms around his arm, and laughed into his shoulder.

“She spent so long tearing up those pieces of paper for you.”

He could get used to this. The happiness. The smiles. The jokes. The heart-warming feeling of being with people he loved and loved him back.

You would hate it after a week.

“Wow, um…thank you?” Akihiko chuckled again when he saw the spread of pancakes on the table. He felt like he could eat anything, but damn did pancakes sound so good right now…

“We worked really hard on them.” Makoto pulled out her chair and sat down with him. “I-I hope you like it.”

She’ll be so disappointed knowing you’re giving up…

“Thank you, Makoto.” He reached for his fork, trying to ignore the

voice in the back of his head. “But I hope you intend on cleaning up that mess behind me.”

She gave her mother a look, then bashfully looked down at her plate. “I-I will…”

Throughout the meal, Makoto continued to be the life of the conversation. She talked about school, her friends, things that brought a smile to her face. He didn’t want to admit that he couldn’t wrap his mind around half of what she was saying. Sometimes it was the pain. Other times, it was the fact he felt Minako’s eyes on him, *studying* him, before returning to her food.

She knows you’re pathetic.

No. He knew the look in her eyes. He had been absent too long, even if he really hadn’t been *gone* . He knew what she wanted. And after his recent hell, he would be a fool to turn her down.

Right?

You love living in this hell. It’s who you are.

He shook his head to help keep his thoughts in check. The pain was much more appreciated.

“How old are you again, Dad?”

His eyes met Makoto’s, but as her smile grew, his eyes narrowed. “Watch it.”

His daughter burst out into a fit of giggles. She was suddenly much younger, sitting on the couch, and laughing at one of the stupid jokes her cartoon characters made. It brought a smile to his face, seeing her happy for the first time in a long time.

Yeah, no thanks to you.

Makoto was at least smart enough not to remind him of exactly how old he really was.

Not old enough to retire…

Akihiko was going to help Makoto clean up her mess once they were all done eating, but she smiled at him and pushed him away. “I can do this on my own, Dad. Go get some sleep. You’re old now.”

In a bold (and probably stupid) move, he grabbed his not-so-tiny daughter and barely managed to get her over his shoulder. It brought out more of her earlier laughter, until he threw her down onto the couch fast enough it knocked the wind out of her. He pinned her down with a hand on her head.

“I’m still young enough to put you in your place.”

She smacked at his arm. “You struggled to pick me up.”

“Maybe you should lay off the sweets for a while.”

He should have known that provoking her would have ended badly. She kicked at him, and by doing so, her foot smashed against his knee. He was at least able to put his hands on the seatback before he collapsed on top of Makoto.

Makoto, terrified, sat up quickly. “Dad…I-I’m so sorry. I’m sorry.”

“Makoto.”

Akihiko held up a hand to keep Minako from thinking this was Makoto’s fault. “I’m okay.”

You are not okay.

Minako and Makoto both stared at him, waiting for him to push himself up and act like it was a joke and that he *wasn’t* hurting… “That was a smart move, Makoto.”

It was the best he could do.

It didn’t work. Makoto didn’t start laughing again. Minako didn’t make some kind of joke to embarrass him. Maybe he wasn’t cut out for the family life either…

“You should go get ready for bed, Makoto.”

Once the pain in his knee became more of a mild throbbing, Akihiko sat himself down on the couch he had thrown Makoto on minutes ago. He caught the sad look in her eyes, so he reached out and stopped her from following her mother's orders.

"It's alright, Makoto."

And there were tears in her eyes. "I hurt you."

He tried to bring back her smile. "Nah. These things happen when you get *old* ."

Whether or not she found it funny like he wanted her to, she at least gave him a smile. She didn't say anything to him, but she did give him a quick hug before taking off to her room. He would probably need to take some pain medication tonight. It would help him sleep, too, since he was *sure* his nightmares would keep him wide awake all night…

"You should probably get ready for bed, too." He turned his head when Minako stepped up next to him. "Old people need their sleep."

She held out a hand to help him up, but that was the moment where something *hit* him. He had dedicated himself to his job for most of his life. He treated Minako like second best. Yet here she was, offering to be his support when he was at his weakest, when he didn't even know who he *was* anymore. Something as simple as reaching out to him was all it took to clear his mind of doubt, pain, and misery…

He grabbed her hand and pulled her down until she was pressed against him. When the surprise cleared and she adjusted to her new position, she searched his eyes with a question on her tongue.

He didn't give her the chance to ask it. "I love you." And he kissed her the next second. She hadn't expected it, but Minako was always quick to adapt, just as she was now. He wanted to slow her down when she tried pulling his shirt over his head, but he couldn't find the heart. Whatever she wanted, he would give her. Just as he should have done all those years ago.

He knew she wanted to say something to him when she broke their kiss and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. “You’ll probably be more comfortable in bed, wouldn’t you?”

Would he? Of course. Did he really want to get up? No. Unfortunately, Minako got off of him and offered her hand again. Her smile burned him alive. “After all, someone needs to burn off all that sugar, doesn’t he?”

What he didn’t tell her was that he was scared that he would never see her again. He would never hear Makoto’s laugh again. He would never earn Sae’s forgiveness. He could have been killed last night. Each of them could be killed without him even knowing it. All because he wanted to bring *one* corrupt man to justice?

No.

Fuck that.

Akihiko pushed himself off the couch and immediately pulled Minako back into him. “I do always tell you that working out after a meal is good for you.”

He had the honor of catching her blush before she buried her face in his chest. But she was quick to flip the tables on him when she shut the bedroom door behind her. The look in her eyes always made him nervous, even if he wasn’t really *nervous* as much as he was… *curious* to know what she was thinking.

She stepped into him quickly, but her eyes were glowing and she was happy and… “No one will hurt you again, Aki. I hope you know I meant what I told you before.”

His arms circled around her and hers wrapped around his neck. “I would hope you wouldn’t kill anyone for me.”

“I would,” she whispered against his skin. “I would kill every single person who tried to cross you, because no one will take you away from me.”

“Minako…”

She silenced him with a soft, yet passionate kiss. Her talking about killing people for his sake was oddly attractive, but he really hoped she didn't mean it. But he knew her, and he knew from the look in her eyes and the tone in her voice that she would follow through on her words.

But, he could soon tell by the way she was kissing him and touching him that she had been scared, too. He was curious to know how she had found out he had been *kidnapped* , since being knocked unconscious wasn't a reason to be so…emotional. It was touching to a degree, knowing that she wasn't tired of his hospital visits and getting into trouble and she still wanted to be with him like this…

"I love you," she said quietly, pulling him down onto the bed with her. He winced when he tried to sit on his knees, but she laughed softly and pushed him down on his back. He always *hated* being on the bottom. He knew she knew that. Tonight, he didn't care.

He wanted to take his time, to *study* her in ways he hadn't done in *years* . He needed to be reminded how she looked, how she felt, how she tasted. It had always done wonders for his mind, for his pain, for those nights he thought he was going to die and remembered what he was going to lose. Either Minako humored him, read his mind, or felt much the same. For someone who was always quick and effective, she took just as much time memorizing *him* as he did her.

He couldn't remember the last time he was so *close* to her, which angered him and embarrassed him at the same time. That feeling disappeared when Minako hovered over him, trying to catch her breath, and smiled at him.

"Maybe I am getting too old for this."

She rolled off of him the next second and face planted into the pillows. Akihiko chuckled at her and rolled over onto his side, lifting his hand to trace his fingers over her back. "It still wouldn't change how much I love you."

"Oh, stop it," she said, her voice muffled by the pillows. She turned her head to face him a moment later. "Maybe if someone would *rest*

and *heal* , I wouldn't have to do all the work."

"I thought you very much enjoyed being the one in control."

Her smile made him warm again. "That, and I get a better view of you." His face burned as she chuckled at him. "But more than that, I love knowing that you trust me enough to see me as your equal. That you can depend on me when you're strong, but also when you're weak."

He brushed a loose strand of hair out of her face before he kissed her. "I wish I was better with words to tell you how much you mean to me."

She moved closer to him and rested her head against his chest. "You don't need to say anything. Because I see it in your eyes all the time. And it will always speak louder than any words you would say to me."

He hugged her tightly, brushing his fingers through her hair and letting the silence fall over them. And having her laying next to him, warm and asleep and *happy* , lulled him into a relatively peaceful sleep.

Maybe he wouldn't need all that pain medication anymore.

Chapter 106

Chapter 106

Ren literally face planted onto his bed when he got home.

Morgana, naturally, found it odd. “Are you okay?”

Was he okay? Probably not. After all, he had just admitted a dark secret desire to Makoto and she flipped it back on him without *blinking* . She did stumble over her words, which was cute, but still…

Maybe a good way to cure his hormones was to tell her *father* and then let him beat him into a bloody mess and follow him around so he *knew* Ren wouldn’t make a move on her.

At least she seemed much happier when he left her. “Sometimes I envy you, Morgana.”

He heard the cat chuckle. “I am pretty awesome.”

He pushed himself up to sit back against the wall. However, he knew he couldn’t tell Morgana the real reason for his troubles, since no one else *knew* . Maybe Futaba did, but he doubted she blabbed to anyone. “It’s been a long day. Sojiro was brutal with his lessons. I hate homework. I just want to go to bed.”

He knew Morgana wouldn’t protest *sleep* , so an hour or two later, Ren was able to close his eyes and drift off to sleep.

He woke up in the middle of the night, terrified he was *dead* , because Makoto came on to him and he was *very* much allowing her to and her *dad* came around the corner. He wouldn’t be surprised if he was wearing a few bruises in the morning just from the *thought* of him beating the hell out of him…

Thankfully, he was tired enough that he fell back asleep soon after, but his alarm went off far too early for his liking. He reached over and turned his phone off, but he had no desire to get out of bed. The

school wouldn't miss him *one* day, would it? Would people even know?

"Get up, Ren!"

For Morgana being a cat, he sure loved to tell *him* when to be awake. Weren't cats supposed to sleep all day? "I'm awake."

"I said *get up!"*

Ren also knew the next time Morgana told him to get up would be with his claws. So, he groaned as he threw his sheets off of him and pushed himself up into a seated position. He stumbled about his room to change into his uniform, then stumbled down the stairs to thank Sojiro for the cup of coffee waiting for him. Even with the caffeine boost, Ren still found himself stumbling out of the door.

He felt like he was half-asleep as he stepped off the train in Shibuya, but the walk to his transfer at least helped to wake him up a little more. In an hour or so, the caffeine would kick in. He would be fine. But damn did he just want to go home after school and *sleep* .

"Ah, good morning, Amamiya-kun."

Ren gripped his phone tightly in his hands as Akechi came to stand next to him. Morgana shifted in his bag. Why did Akechi always like to catch him right after he missed a train? "Good morning."

He watched Akechi closely from the corner of his eyes. Ren knew there was something odd about him, but he knew he had to be careful. He was sure that Sanada and his friends didn't investigate just *anyone* . That and he had his own doubts for months. Akechi never really bothered him, annoyed him maybe, but the grin on his face made Ren very curious.

"I'm surprised you're not dead."

That got Ren to lower his phone and turn to the boy next to him. "Why do you say that?"

Akechi chuckled under his breath. "Well, I know Makoto's father is very possessive and would beat you within an inch of your life if he

knew.”

Ren was expecting something Phantom Thief related, or Akechi to pout because he wasn’t popular anymore. Bringing up *Makoto* was *not* something he was ready for. “What?”

Morgana rubbed his head against his back. While Ren never wanted to physically harm anyone, he was very tempted to ignore his cat friend and push Akechi onto the tracks. He really hoped that didn’t show on his face.

“Oh. Perhaps she was lying to me then?”

When in gods name had Makoto spoken to Akechi without the rest of them? “She told me her parents were dead.”

Akechi, likely feigning surprise, tilted his head with wide eyes. “I see. Perhaps she was trying to derail me when I told her I *knew* she was a Phantom Thief.”

It was hard to focus his attention on his phone, but if he was looking at Akechi, the teen would see the change in his eyes. He started scrolling through news feeds and random apps just to appear uninterested. He threw on a smile to try and throw him off even more. “You think Makoto is a Phantom Thief? We are talking about the same person, right?”

Whether or not his tone was convincing or not, he didn’t look over at Akechi to find out. “I would suggest you get to know your girlfriend more, Amamiya-kun. She’s very strong and aggressive when provoked.”

…What did that mean? Had Akechi *provoked* her? Why wouldn’t she have told him? “I don’t believe that. She’s too timid for her own good.”

The speakers announced the oncoming train, and Ren once again had to clench his phone before he shoved Akechi towards it. “Well, it was a pleasure speaking with you, Amamiya-kun.” He saw him bow to him. “Have a wonderful day.”

As soon as he was on the train and away from prying eyes, Ren

shot a text to Makoto. He had to play it cool, or she would freak out. So, he simply said, *I'd really like to have lunch with you today :)*

And he waited. And waited. His phone buzzed in his hand when he stepped out of the station. *I'll let you know.*

It wasn't a *yes* , but he would run around the school to find her before anyone else did. Surely this *one time* she could forgo her duties and talk to him. Now he just had to hope Akechi wasn't yanking his chain to start anything. But how in the world would he know they were *dating?* Ann didn't even know!

Ren tried to be cool and calm and collected as class continued on. But he was constantly checking his phone or looking up at the clock. He barely took any notes. Makoto would be very upset with him if she knew he was slacking off in class…

He even counted down the seconds to the lunch bell just so he was ready to take off out the door. He didn't care who thought him strange or who tried to stop him. He had to get to Makoto first. If he failed, he couldn't push that person away without having serious repercussions.

When the bell sounded, Ren whispered to Morgana to stay in the desk and bolted out the door. He literally jumped down the stairs to the first floor classrooms and rounded the corner fast enough that he lost his balance for a second. His heart dropped in his chest when he saw Makoto talking to a few other students, but then she made eye contact with him, said something to the group around her, and pushed her way over to him.

He may have been too touched at the sight that he froze up when she stepped in front of him. "Where would you like to go?"

Right. He asked her to have lunch with him. He didn't have food, nor did he want to go to the cafeteria and talk to her there, but she would judge him if he didn't do *something* . "If we hurry, we can catch the last of the yakisoba pan and I'll buy you one."

He didn't have a lot of time, so before he got pulled into her eyes, he grabbed her wrist and pulled her along behind him. Unfortunately,

there was only one left over, but he at least promised to share it with her. Again, he chose not to wait for an answer, lest he forget his mission, and he led her out to the vending machines his group had claimed months ago. A student or two passed by, but it was relatively quiet.

“Are you okay?”

Ren made a move to unwrap their lunch, but he wasn’t sure how he would start the conversation. He didn’t want to make it sound like he was mad at her, but he was worried. Akechi *did* like to single out Makoto when they were all together and ran into him.

“I actually have something I wanted to talk to you about.”

Makoto’s expression went from curious to concerned when he exhaled. To hopefully ease her worry, he reached for the hand she had resting at her side. He was at least mindful enough to keep their hands out of sight, but he squeezed her anyway.

“Have you spoken to Akech recently?”

Had he not known her, he might have missed the small flinch in her hand or in her shoulders. Likely knowing she was caught, she lowered her head, but he wouldn’t let go of her hand. “H-He spoke to me…y-yes…”

“About what?”

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Ren tried to wait patiently for her to answer. “He told me he knew about my dad, and my mom. And…a-and…”

He turned in his place to hold her one hand between both of his. “Did he threaten you?”

“N-Not really…” Even though she was nervous, she gave off a light chuckle. “I-I may have lashed out at him. But he kept talking about my sister, and my parents…”

Ren smiled softly. “I would have *loved* to have seen you put him in his place.”

“I think I did the opposite, if I’m being honest.” Makoto paused to take another breath. “I think he knows, Ren. About me being in the Phantom Thieves. He knows about my parents. He knows about *you* …”

Well, Akechi knowing about his relationship with Makoto wasn’t *bad* , more annoying than anything. Akechi knowing about Makoto’s family made him more angry and concerned. Especially since Akechi was a *detective* and Sanada was a cop and her sister worked with everyone…

Or was Akechi just mad and trying to rile up the only other person he spoke to who wouldn’t murder him? Well, hopefully Makoto had hurt him badly enough that he wouldn’t mess with her again.

“I’m just glad you’re okay.” He gave her another smile when she looked over at him. “I don’t care what Akechi thinks. So if I need to walk you home *and* pick you up, you just have to let me know.”

There was something in her eyes that made Ren’s heart hurt. Had he said something wrong? Was he too overbearing? He only wanted her to be safe…

“My father was kidnapped…the other night…”

Ren was so surprised by the news that he fell back and smacked his head against the wall. “What?”

“He’s home now. But he’s always hurting. He tries to cover it up, but he always walks with a limp now. He’s always the one who’s facing trouble just because people hate him for doing a *good job.* ”

Makoto’s hands gripped at the edge of her skirt. Ren didn’t think it was an appropriate time to tell her she was beautiful…

“I’m tired of him thinking he’s alone, that he has to fight these battles on his own. I can’t keep letting Akechi or my sister or the rest of the damn world pull him under. But I’m not smart enough, or strong enough…not yet.”

His hand fell to cover one of her own. “I don’t think there’s anything wrong with your mentality. You should be proud of yourself.”

Her smile was more angry than happy. “I’m always saying *words* , Ren. Words aren’t going to help my dad, or scare Akechi away, or sway my sister…”

“Makoto,” he said as he exhaled. “You shouldn’t be expected to solve every problem on your own.”

“I know.” He expected her to ramble on about her doubts, but she did quite the opposite. “I’ve learned a lot from him, from you, our friends. You’ve all been such an inspiration. And little by little, things are changing. So if I can be like my dad and inspire people to fight rather than give up, maybe the world will be a better place for the generations that follow after us.”

For the past few weeks, Ren wanted to describe the way he felt around Makoto. She was always cute, which was what initially attracted him in the first place, but he had been back and forth about her until after Kaneshiro. He didn’t quite understand her. She was always withdrawn, determined to do things on her own, but he didn’t like that she always kept it *hidden* . He knew that it was just who she was, and he accepted it, but he wanted to help her. He wanted to be there for her.

But now, listening to her speak with conviction, it made him stop. Makoto was one of the most selfless people he had ever met. And here she was, carving her own future to leave a positive mark on the world, as she had said her father had done. It was a simple statement, but the way she said it made him look at her in a different light.

He wouldn’t know what *love* was, but he was admired for sure. It made him want to be a better person while keeping her on her path. And if that wasn’t really love, then what was?

“S-Sorry…” He also *hated* when she apologized after speaking from her heart. “I may have rambled on…”

He knew where he was and who might see them, but he didn’t care. He wrapped an arm over her shoulder and pulled her against him. He chuckled into her hair when she tensed under his arm. “I think what you said was beautiful. And you’re beautiful. And I hope you

know that I will do whatever I can to help you see this through."

Her hands covered her face, and he didn't need to see her reaction to know what it was. Without even thinking, he pressed his lips against the top of her head, then gently pulled her away from him. She was in a daze for a second, but when his hand brushed a stray strand of hair off her face, she was quick to snap out of it.

"I also want you to stop hiding from me and tell me things that bother you, okay?"

Makoto continued to stare back at him blankly, then the sound of the warning bell went off in the school. They hadn't even eaten their lunch, but he thought it was a good break anyway. He handed her the sandwich and slowly came to his feet.

"You should be proud of yourself, Makoto," he said as he stretched his back. "If there were more people like your dad, I'm sure the world would be a perfect place."

He dropped his gaze to where she was still sitting, but to his surprise, instead of a blush, she was thinking about something. Maybe a way to tell him he was wrong? But he meant it…

"Then can I ask for your help with something?"

Those piercing red eyes made him warm on the inside. He was pretty sure his heart skipped an unhealthy amount of beats. "Um. Of course."

Makoto held the sandwich in her hands as she stood up next to him. "I've been trying to find the student that has been spotted in Kabukicho. We didn't learn anything the last time we went, and I know you're busy, but if you hear anything, I would-,"

"You went there by yourself?"

Had *that* been why she was still holding back?

But the blush was back on her face and a childish grin followed and he was pretty sure he melted against the vending machines. "My dad took me. I actually didn't do anything, but watching him do his

job was a lot of fun."

If she got any cuter… "Sure. I'll try and do my best." Ren took a small step closer to her so she looked back up at him. "Especially if it makes you this happy."

Her face turned that perfect shade of pink. But she dropped her head, took a step around him, then came to a stop. "T-Thank you… Ren."

After school that day, he started his search for information. When Ryuji was working with him to find out more about Kamoshida, it had taken a day or two to get what he needed. He figured it wouldn't be hard to do the same about the girl Makoto wanted to know about.

Ren first asked Mishima, since that boy was the gossip *king* . He sent him a simple text asking him about a female student roaming around Shinjuku, then Kabukicho to be more specific. Sadly, Mishima didn't have anything for him, but he at least told Ren he would keep his ears open and make it his first priority.

His second attempt had been the newspaper club girl. He didn't really know if she was a trustworthy source, easily buying into the gossip of the school, but Ren thought maybe gossip would point him in the right direction. She was still intimidated by him, but then she grabbed his arm and pulled him around the corner.

"I've heard of something."

Okay. That was a good start. Hopefully. "You have?"

"Eiko. She's a third year. She likes to talk about a boyfriend who owns a club, I guess."

Ren had a name. He had a little something extra to give to Makoto. But he didn't want to waste her time, so he figured it would be wise to confirm the information. He had no idea who the student in question was, and he didn't want to tell Makoto in case she ran with it and it turned out to be nothing. The only other third year student he knew was Haru, but she wasn't into the gossip scene, preferring to tend to her garden on the rooftop.

It was just his luck that the next morning, Mishima sent him a text while he was waiting for the train in Yongen-Jaya.

The girl you are looking for is Eiko. Third year. She has a boyfriend who works at a club. She claims he's the best and works with him. Pretty sure there's something dangerous going on! Maybe the Phantom Thieves can work on it?

For once, Ren was okay letting Makoto handle the problem on her own. Just so long as she took her dad, or him, or another friend, and he got to see her beaming smile again.

Chapter 107

Chapter 107

It was one of those rare mornings where she was up before Akihiko.

Minako watched him sleep for a few minutes, knowing he had been restless all night, but she was happy he looked peaceful at the moment. He hadn't told her what had happened the other day when he was kidnapped, but a part of her didn't want to ask. He had already been through so much. The last thing she wanted to do was add to his worries by making him relive that night…

Mitsuru hadn't been happy with him, but even then, she didn't tell Minako *why.* Akihiko wasn't one to care what danger came his way, so she would make a bet that Mitsuru *knew* he was getting into trouble and he didn't listen to her warning.

She lifted a hand to gently brush her fingers through his hair, happy to know he was back, he was alive, he was well. She wanted to *beat* him from time to time, but she told herself she would be better at making sure she *knew* what he was doing, where he was, regardless of if he wanted her to know or not.

As soon as her hand landed on his head, his wrist shot up and grabbed her, scaring her half to death. At first, she thought it was a simple reflex, but then his eyes opened and he started breathing as if *she* had scared him.

"I-I'm sorry…" She thought she avoided his injury, but maybe he was still in too much pain. "I didn't mean to startle you."

It took him a few seconds to realize where he was and who he was with, but every second that passed, her heart grew heavier. Akihiko pushed himself up when he released her hand. "No. I…I'm sorry."

Minako wanted to ask him what had happened to him, just so it was out in the open and she *knew* and she could help him. She smiled softly at him, even if he wasn't looking at her. He looked very tired.

She wondered if he even slept.

Then, in the blink of an eye, he was sitting up fully, a smile spreading across his face, a light in his eyes she *knew* he was faking. He didn't give her the chance to comment on it. "So. What do you want to do today?"

She stared back at him, wondering what was going through his mind. She knew he faced trauma well, usually only needing a day or two to be back to normal, but she felt off. But, again, he didn't give her time to ask him about it.

"I know you said you want to go see the sights, but I could *really* use some coffee today."

"Didn't sleep well?" she asked, hoping to catch a facial reaction that would tip her off one way or another.

Surprisingly, he chuckled, and she was still left hanging in the middle. "I'll be alright. I know a really good place that has coffee I can take you to!"

He sounded happy, he *looked* happy, but Minako knew he *wasn't.* She figured she was losing her mind, or that maybe she didn't sleep well herself, so she nodded her head and sat up next to him. "I don't want you pushing yourself for my sake."

When Akihiko threw his head back and *laughed* , Minako really thought she had lost her mind and this was all a weird, but happy dream. "Please. I've dealt with you for this long. What's another few years, right?"

She was stunned into silence, but he continued moving out of bed like she had tossed a joke at him. "Um. Are you…okay?"

Was it the medication? Was she really dreaming, or hallucinating? Had the news of his kidnapping knocked her out and none of this was *real?*

He lost his smile, but he didn't seem very… *sad?* "I just figured since I would be taking another month off work to *recover* , that I would do something with you."

She had so much she wanted to say to him, but as he turned his back to put on something more appropriate, her words died on her tongue. Yes he was acting weird, but that didn't mean she had to keep bombarding him with questions and doubts. What if it was genuine? What if that few hours he was missing snapped something inside of him?

Her heart hurt at that one. She would be devastated, too. Maybe instead of doubting him, she could be happy and excited like he was. "So then," she said with a smile growing on her face. "Where are you taking me out to today?"

"Wherever you want to go." She was lucky enough to steal a glance at his upper body before he threw a shirt on. "After coffee though. Or I'll be even more dead weight."

He was being very playful…

Stop doubting him. "Then we can plan out our day when you're more conscious."

Akihiko returned her smile with one of his own, but as Minako continued to get ready for the day herself, she couldn't shake the feeling from her heart. While he had recently made it known to her that he wanted to break away from his secrets and that he didn't care who knew about his family anymore, he seemed…fake. Like he was trying to make her believe that he wasn't upset or scared or worried he was going to die or *they* would die…

The feeling was easier to mask as the morning went on. Akihiko appeared more relaxed and natural as he escorted her to his favorite place to have his morning coffee. He did tell her it was just the *coffee* he loved, that her breakfast never had an equal, and she did giggle at that.

Minako had no idea where they were, but once they stepped into the small shop, she felt much more at home. She wasn't a coffee drinker, being too *bitter* of a drink, but the place was homey. Quaint. Warm. Plus, it was just her and Akihiko and the barista that walked up to them with a grin on his face…

“Ah, so you found yourself another woman, eh?”

When Akihiko groaned loudly, Minako chuckled at him. “He’s always with a different girl every day.”

“Stop that.” And *there* was the Akihiko she remembered. All flustered and embarrassed and trying to cover it up. “She’s my wife, okay? I was never married to Mitsuru.”

It was weird being called his *wife* to a man she had never met. Hell, it was weird to hear Akihiko call her that *at all* . The man behind the counter gave her a warm smile. “Then it’s nice to meet you.”

Minako followed after Akihiko and pulled out a seat and sat at the bar. Her eyes glanced at all the jars of beans that were on shelves. She was not a coffee expert, but damn that was a lot of beans. How in the world did someone know the difference between one bean and another? Was there a difference? She would never know.

“And what would the lady like?”

She was put on the spot. Thankfully, Akihiko spoke up for her. “She likes anything sweet. Coffee flavored *sugar* is what she prefers.”

A laugh broke out from her throat. “I don’t need the energy like he does.”

“Heh,” the man laughed. “I know just what to make for you.”

Minako really tried to watch him work, but the *second* she felt Akihiko’s hand on her thigh, she almost fell off her chair. “Well, tell me what we’re going to do today.”

“Ah…r-right…” She did *not* just stutter, did she? “There’s a lot to see. Maybe since we’re in the area, we should stick to places out here.” She had made a list at one point in time, but she hadn’t thought about trying to find it that morning before they left. She knew she should have put it on her phone.

Akihiko must have sensed her hesitation while she was thinking. “If you want to get out of the big city, we can go to Meiji Shrine. I’ve heard it’s a great escape, and peaceful at the same time. Or there’s

a park in Shinjuku we could go to, or outside of the town a little ways is another park, or-,"

"Honey, stop." She put a hand on his leg to pull his attention to her. "Let's go see the shrine. And then we can go from there, okay?"

That smile came back to his face that made her wonder if it was genuine. "Alright."

Stop doubting him. Isn't this what you wanted?

Slightly uncomfortable, she shifted in her seat. Her eyes fell to the countertop in front of her. Isn't this what she wanted? To go out and about and see the city with the man she loved? Why was she feeling like it wasn't all that special? Did she have to get used to it? Did it not feel so special because Akihiko was likely forcing himself into it? But she knew better than to ask, since she did as much on their beach vacation and he sounded so convincing. It would break his heart if he knew she was doubting him again for the same reasons.

"Here you are."

Akihiko's hand tensed on her leg, but when Minako looked up, it wasn't the barista that greeted her. "R-Ren?"

The young man smiled at her as he dropped both of their cups in front of them. "This is a surprise."

She could practically feel the glare Akihiko was giving Ren, but she simply dropped a hand over his to warn him. "Aki tells me you make great coffee."

"I said I know a great *place* . *He* doesn't make it."

Minako chuckled. "I'm sure he's learning."

"I am," Ren said, his smile still showing on his face. "I kind of know how to make yours, Sanada-san. But, since you're new here, Minako, I let Sojiro work his magic for yours."

Minako had to bite back another laugh at his usage of names. "I'm sure it's fine."

“Don’t call me *Sanada-san* . It makes me feel old.” She turned to find Akihiko scowling, but he soon looked down to the cup in his hands. She would have laughed at him, but there was something in his tone that concerned her. He was *never* remorseful around Ren, but that was the first word that came to her mind. But… *why?*

“Can I call you *Dad* then?”

The look was gone the next second, and while Minako *thoroughly* enjoyed the comment, she was also very worried about Ren’s safety.

Oddly enough, Akihiko said nothing for the longest time, just glared at him, then returned to his coffee. “Just keep Makoto safe.”

Ren may have thought nothing of it, but it struck something in her. Had this been why Akihiko was acting so weird? Was he threatened? Were *they* threatened? She knew that his kids meant everything to him, and he had worked so hard to keep criminals from using them against him…

But then why was he so willing and eager to go out with her like he wasn’t afraid?

She had to change the subject. “I went to the Metaverse the other day.”

Not the conversation she wanted to bring up, over morning coffee, when Akihiko was trying to pretend he was fine and wasn’t falling apart, but it worked. Ren and Akihiko shot her a surprised look, but Ren was the first one to overcome his shock and speak up.

“Did…did you learn anything?”

“Minako…”

Her hand tightened over the one still on her leg. “No. Not really. But I did want to ask you, since I’m thinking about it, if you ever felt a pressure or something like that when you first entered…”

Minako and Akihiko both jumped in their seats when a ball of black jumped onto the counter, then to the chair next to where she sat.

“That’s a weird thing to have happen.”

Her eyes fell to her side where the black cat she had met before wagged his tail happily. She almost reached out and petted him. “Y-You can…you can *talk?”*

His big blue eyes sparkled. “I sure can, but no one else knows that. You should keep your voice down.”

She heard Akihiko sigh heavily behind her. Whether that meant he was annoyed that the cat had scared them both or he was sensing her desire to ask to pet the animal, she wasn’t sure. She didn’t even ask and lifted a hand to the cat’s head, and he was very quick to rub against her palm.

“You’re spoiling him.”

The cat ignored Ren’s comment. “She’s nice. I like her.”

And now *she* felt spoiled.

“So. Do you know anything?”

Minako knew Akihiko was always to the point, but he sounded annoyed. She felt bad. This was supposed to be a time for the two of them to go out and do something together and she was ruining it. To hopefully calm him, she searched for his hand again, pulled it up to rest back on her leg, and lightly squeezed his hand.

The cat, however, took the silence as an opportunity to speak. “I’ve never known anyone to feel something like that. But I’ve also never met another person with Ren’s powers. Or…who had them. I’m sorry.”

She shook her head. “No. It’s okay. I was just curious, is all…”

“Igor seemed like he knew you, but he told me he didn’t.”

That sparked her attention. “What?”

Ren must have grown nervous because he threw his hands into his pockets. “I spoke to him a while back. I didn’t say anything to you

because it wasn't anything *good* . The twins that I speak to seemed to recognize the name Theo. But that was about it. Did you…did you ever make him mad?"

How *dare* Igor treat her like a long forgotten weakling! He *had* to remember her. She worked so hard for him, for Theo, for the damn *world* . And then he goes and *forgets* her?

She came to her senses when Akihiko squeezed her hand. "But why couldn't she see anything?"

Minako wanted to stop the conversation. She shouldn't have started it at all. Sure she hoped at some point, everything would make sense to her, but Akihiko wanted to take her out. Ren was a busy school kid. She should have known better than to be so selfish and now *angry* just for some answers.

"Maybe someone doesn't want you to figure that out."

Silence. Mitsuru had said the same thing when she had picked them up at the station. But why? And who wouldn't want her to know?

Ren cleared his throat, then added, "Sometimes when I ask Igor a direct question, he tells me it will be made known to me as I go on. It's irritating, but…maybe that's what they are expecting with you?"

What she didn't tell Ren was that if she didn't learn something soon, she wouldn't be able to help Sae, and she would in turn destroy their family… "I…I hope…"

Thankfully, there were other customers in the café, so the conversation died at that. Minako turned to face Akihiko, feeling terribly guilty about annoying him and being selfish when he only wanted to take her places...

"How's your coffee?"

The smile was back on his face almost as if she had poked fun at him. His eyes were missing some of the light she loved to see when he was *truly* happy, but it was a start. She offered him a smile, which made his brighten, then she turned to her untouched cup. She said nothing as she brought it to her lips, the smell sweet enough for her

liking, but she was quite impressed with the first sip. It was sweet, a little bitter, but smooth. It was kind of like she was drinking Akihiko's coffee with a melted piece of chocolate (or several) inside the cup.

"It's good." She took another sip, enjoying how the liquid made her relax, and she noticed Akihiko return to his coffee, too.

"We've lived here for how long now?" he asked, lowering his cup and keeping his eyes ahead of him. He looked so *happy* , but yet so *sad* at the same time. "I just found this place this year. I've been missing out."

A small laugh escaped her lips. "There's plenty of time to find what else you've been missing out on."

He turned to her with a smile that melted her heart. "We sure do, don't we?"

And she felt it again. That doubt. That questioning concern. But she didn't have the heart to voice her thoughts. Maybe she would once they had returned home for the night.

The coffee did wonders for her mind and body as Akihiko paid their tab and said goodbye to the older man. Before they walked out, Ren walked up to her. "I'll keep trying to ask if I see him again."

She wanted to hug him, but she settled for a smile. "Don't overwork yourself for my sake, okay?"

He nodded to her, then returned to tending to his customers.

Yeah. He would be really good for Makoto…

"Minako."

She snapped out of her daydream and followed behind Akihiko with a playful smile. To her surprise, he smiled back at her as he reached for her hand and tugged on her until she fell against him. "Do we need to make a pitstop back home before we go out and about? You have a lot of energy right now."

Did he *seriously* just say that? She felt her insides warm by a

hundred degrees. “W-What?”

Akihiko didn’t reply and pulled her along to the train station. The only time Minako released her breath was when they boarded the train in Shibuya headed *north* rather than south… Not that she wasn’t *entertained* by the idea, but…

He was forcing it. For her sake. Because he was still under the impression he had denied her too much and he could have been *killed* the other day…

Minako always felt comfortable being next to Akihiko while they were both quiet. She didn’t need words to read him. She didn’t need words or actions to know he was happy or content with her. Sometimes, she would even zone out thinking about how happy she was until Makoto came home and asked her why dinner wasn’t ready.

She would have felt much the same as she walked next to him, but her mind was a *mess* . Akihiko was a mess, just not telling her as much. She might have known *why* , but couldn’t bring herself to ask him. *She* was a mess, worried about what Ren had told her, how it meant she may likely not be able to help Sae, how that in turn made Akihiko more miserable as the days went on.

“Here, Minako.” Something was pushed into her hand. She was thankful that Akihiko didn’t realize she had spaced out to the point she had no idea where she was. Her eyes dropped to her hand, now holding a phone, and it took her several more seconds to come to her senses.

He draped an arm over her shoulder and her heart dropped into her stomach.

He wanted her to take their picture. Like the last time at the temple for the fireworks. Because *she* wanted it. However, instead of arguing with him, making *him* feel worse than he already was, she lifted the phone and tried not to have the camera snap her *true* feelings.

Akihiko was oddly excited about walking around the shrine. He told

her it was peaceful, a nice escape from the noise of the city, and she thought he gave her some facts about the area. It would have been beyond precious…had he been doing it for the right reasons.

“Can I tell you something?”

Minako pulled herself out of her own doubts and blinked. They were at the heart of the shrine. The sun was out. It was a little cool, but not uncomfortable. Some people were walking around, some tourists, some dropping by to pay their respects to the gods. When she turned to Akihiko, his eyes were on one of the people in prayer, and she had to laugh.

“It’s beautiful here, but I didn’t think you would be interested in watching people pray.”

A sad smile formed on his face. It was the first smile she actually *believed* expressed his feelings. “You were mad at me several years ago over this whole hiding issue. Someone at work told me to stop by here on my way back home. Get out of my head for a while. So I did. I sure as hell didn’t pray, but it was nice to just walk around in peace.”

She held her hands behind her back so he wouldn’t notice her confusion, even if she knew he would. “Oh.”

“Well, finally, some lady caught me watching people, and she asked me why I wasn’t going up to the altar. I told her the same thing I told you years before, that I didn’t need a god to do what *I* couldn’t do for you.”

He paused, crossed his arms, and she waited patiently for him to speak back up. “I prayed with her to make her happy. It was pathetic, and awkward, but then she looked at me and said that no man can do every little thing on their own. That’s why she prayed.”

It was the strangest thing to hear him talk about, but she didn’t stop him. “I tried to stop by whenever I was worried about the kids, or you, and I just asked for someone to keep you safe. And here I am, years later, feeling like an arrogant little bastard for telling you I could keep you safe when all I ever did was put you in danger.”

She grabbed his hand. “Aki, I know you worry about us all the time, and nothing I tell you would ever make you worry any less, but this is not *your* fault.”

His hand tensed in hers. “I just feel like I’ve failed all of you from the beginning. I couldn’t even keep you safe. I had to depend on a *god* to do my job as a father.”

“Aki.” She tugged on his hand until he looked at her. “No bad guy started caring about you or our children until this year. Everything has gone to hell in this world. But you know what? You taught Sae how to take care of herself, and she’s fine. Makoto is a little *harder* to control, but you’ve been there for her every step of the way. She’s learning, and one day, she’s going to lead just as you have. So don’t tell me the gods have raised my children to be smart and strong when I’ve *seen* what you’ve done for them, what you *still do* for them.”

He chuckled softly. “I just bring more suffering.”

“You took Makoto out that night.” He gave her a questioning look as she smiled. “I wanted to yell at you for dressing her up as a cop and taking her into town, but I saw the look on her face when she told me about it. She was just as excited and happy as she was when her Buchimaru show came on TV when she was a child. The gods didn’t take her out and bring a smile to her face. *You* did.”

Akihiko looked away nervously, likely because she had *known* about him taking Makoto out when he tried to be covert about it, but eventually he sighed deeply. “I don’t want her to be a cop.”

Her heart twisted in her chest. “I’m sure you don’t. So all you can do is teach her so she turns out to be as wonderful as you have been.”

A flash of something crossed over his face, but it was gone before she could name it. “Yeah…”

Neither one of them spoke as she followed behind him once he started moving again. Akihiko was back to his fake, happy self the second they stepped off the shrine’s ground, grabbing her hand and pulling her along to the next place he wanted to show her.

“I bet you’ll love to walk down Takeshita Street.”

She really wanted to go home, wrap him in her arms, tell him no one would *ever* hurt him again.

But she couldn’t. She could only nod her head and follow him wherever his heart desired to take her. She tried to show some level of excitement for his sake, because while she was happy to be out and about with him, she knew he was scared. And while she also enjoyed their small sightseeing adventure, when they both called it a day and returned home, Minako couldn’t keep her question contained.

“Will you please tell me what happened?”

Akihiko put their bags down in their room from their trip, but he stared back at her, confused. “What do you mean?”

She didn’t hesitate. “When you were kidnapped. What happened?”

His eyes widened in surprise, but then he tried to laugh it off. “Oh. Oh, you know…I just had a talk with someone. Nothing big. It’s okay.”

Her heart couldn’t take it anymore. She covered her face with her hands, dropped to the bed behind her, and sobbed. “You’re so afraid, Aki. I can see it. Someone hurt you, and now I feel like you’re trying to convince me you’re okay and you’re *not* .”

The space on the bed next to her shifted as he took a seat next to her. “I…I thought you were happy?”

His arm wrapped around her and she fell against him easily. “I am. I was so happy being out with you, when you called me your wife, when you took all those pictures with me…”

He was quiet. Then, “B-But…”

“But,” she replied, wiping a hand over her eyes. “I worry that this person took a part of you away and now you’ll never be the same.”

Again, he chuckled to cover up his insecurities. “Well, maybe he just

put things into perspective for me. I'm getting old. I can barely walk without feeling a little bit of pain. People hate me. Crime will never *stop* . So why am I wasting my time trying to make a difference when no one cares? And why would I waste my time doing my job when I can spend the rest of my time with you, and Makoto, and maybe Sae?"

She lifted her head, and instead of finding a smile or a frown on his face, he was *angry* . "W-What?"

"Nothing." His eyes met hers. "I just want to be with you. So from this day on, that's exactly what I'll do. I'm not going to waste away around people who want to see me waste away and die without a care in the world. If that makes sense."

Months ago, she would have jumped for joy hearing him talk like this. But now, she saw what it was doing to him. He didn't *want* to quit, but someone told him it was *pointless* , probably threatened him, and now, he was giving up. Likely for their sake. It broke her heart.

"When I get cleared by the doctor to go back to work, I'm sure they would be thrilled to hear me say I'm retiring. But then I think about all the cool places we can go, and it's okay."

He leaned in to kiss the crown of her head, then walked out of the room. She sat there, stunned into silence. She really hoped she met the man who broke her husband, just so she could physically return the favor.

Murder would be too forgiving.

Chapter 108

Chapter 108

“…I’m retiring…”

Her fist slammed into the bag again, and again, and again until her hand grew numb. She was so *angry* , but she couldn’t take it out on anyone. At least, no one she *knew* , because if she *ever* found out whoever thought they could intimidate her *father* into retiring, they would regret it.

Makoto took a step back to catch her breath. She had overheard her dad telling her mom that he was planning on retiring. She had been in a rush to get out of the kitchen with her mom’s candy and sneak into her room, but she was sure she heard him right. And she knew her dad wouldn’t *give up* unless he was *forced* to. And why would he be forced to?

Because she was weak.

She had to be stronger. She had to get smarter. She had to show the world that she was not a pushover and she got her strength from her dad. Maybe then he wouldn’t be so worried about her safety…

Maybe if she could have faced her sister weeks ago, none of this would be happening…

But if she had learned anything, she knew it was too late to change what already *happened* . So she punched the bag again. She kicked at it harder. She had to reach a new level of strength so her dad would have faith in her and he could still train her and teach her and…

Makoto only stopped because she felt eyes on her. It wouldn’t have been the first time that night, but it always made her uncomfortable. The first time, it was some skinny little boy who was *terrified* of her, then ran into the change room when she glared at him (she hadn’t meant to).

This time, she was the one who wanted to run out the door and out of the gym. Ryuji stared back at her, eyes wide, jaw open comically, silent. Ren looked *almost* the same, but there was mild amusement on his face.

She wiped at her face to give her more time to think without looking stupid. “What are you guys doing here?”

Ryuji continued to stand awe-struck. Ren, however, took a few steps closer to her in their friend’s silence. “You are extremely hot right now.”

“Yes, because I’ve been here for almost two hours.” She figured she should probably take a small break and cool off. She didn’t want to admit to Ren that she had lost track of time. Her dad would have harped on her for not taking a water break, but she was *so angry…*

But, Ren started laughing. He couldn’t even speak to her. Despite her best wishes, her face flushed at it. Hopefully, he didn’t notice, or she could pass it off as a result of exertion. “W-What?”

That was when she realized that she didn’t have a shirt on because she was hot and it kept getting in her way and she didn’t think she would run into people she *knew* . Not that she had never worn spandex shorts or sports bras at the gym before, but…never in front of *Ren!*

And now she felt like a fool. *That* was probably what Ren meant about being *hot* …

The second she reached out to grab her shirt she had thrown haphazardly over a chair, Ren stopped laughing. “Wait! I’m sure you’re more focused and unrestricted like this, yeah?”

When she turned to him, his smile only grew more *cunning.* Even if he had been right about being *unrestricted* , she sure as hell wouldn’t be as *focused* knowing his eyes were on her. Regardless of if he had seen her in a bathing suit once, this was different.

Ryuji finally chose that moment to speak. “Damn Makoto. You’re like…super hot!”

It took her several seconds to let Ryuji's comment sink in, but then she quickly grabbed her shirt and threw it over her head. Both boys seemed *very* disappointed. "Stop staring at me."

"Well, how about you fight me?" Ren had a decent amount of nerve to approach her. She almost punched him. "If I win, you have to train me. And to do that the best without *hindrances* , no shirts. I'll kick Ryuji out. Don't worry. He doesn't get to look at you the way I do."

Her eyes narrowed at him. "I'll kill you, Ren."

He threw his head back and laughed. "You might. But I would die happy. I promise."

Seriously. He made *no* sense sometimes.

"Oh, *shit!* Ren, you're gonna get your *ass* kicked, man!"

Without even being told, Ren began removing his outer jacket and starting some basic warm-up stretches. If she knew him like she thought she did, there was no way he was serious. And even if he was, she could probably pick him up and break him in half without trying. But…if he wanted a fight, he was going to get one.

And she would not *lose* .

She took a fighting stance, passive, yet balanced, ready to strike or defend, just like her dad always taught her.

All Ren had to do was show a cocky grin and she sprang to life. He probably wasn't ready, but her fist landed in his stomach. She twisted her body until her shoulder was in his chest, then used her foot to knock him off balance. With a little bit of maneuvering, she pulled Ren over her shoulder and threw him onto his back, knocking the wind out of his lungs with a satisfying grunt.

Being in a prideful state of mind, she dropped to her knees next to him and pressed her forearm into his chest when he tried to move. "You're lucky I'm not finishing you off right now."

He coughed and took a few moments to catch his breath. Makoto worried for a second or two that she had hurt him, but when that

damn smile came back to his face, she told herself he could suck it up.

Ryuji started howling with laughter. “Oh my *god* , Ren. You got *smoked!”*

Makoto pushed herself to her feet, suddenly feeling the strain from throwing Ren onto his back. She really hoped she didn’t pull something. She thought she executed the technique perfectly… “A-Are you okay?”

She held out her hand to help Ren back up, but he just laid there, a smile on his face, still trying to catch his breath. “Y-Yeah…I might be a little…hurt.”

Ryuji continued to slap at his knees in laughter, but Makoto quickly lowered herself to try and help Ren sit up. “I-I’m sorry. I was just caught up in the moment and I…I don’t like losing challenges I’m really sorry!”

She felt his hand on her face and all her thoughts came to a blinding halt. His thumb ran along her cheekbone. She was pretty sure she stopped breathing. All the while he still wore a damn *smile* . “I’ll be okay. Maybe. Probably.” Her heart stopped beating when he rested his head against hers. “You know what will help with the pain, right?”

Right. She didn’t have time to be spacing out. Ren was *hurt* . He needed help! What was wrong with her? “R-Right! I’ll get you some pain reliever! I think I have some in my bag!”

She was on her feet again and scanning through her gym bag in a flash. Sadly, she didn’t find anything that would help him, so maybe she could run across the street and pick him up some. After all, she was the reason he was hurting. And she needed to get home soon before her parents started to worry about her.

But when she looked back at Ren to tell him her plan, his smile was gone. He seemed to be in more pain than she thought. She was relieved to some degree when he managed to push himself up off the floor. When his eyes met hers, she saw a hint of sadness in them.

“Can I still train with you if I tell you something I learned today?”

Her head fell to her chest, suddenly embarrassed about beating him and wounding his pride. “U-Um…y-you don’t have to tell me. I’ll be more than happy to train you.”

The brightness returned to his features. She had no idea that she would ever miss seeing him happy like this. He looked back over to Ryuji, who was wiping the tears from his eyes, and Ren told him, “Yeah, yeah. Go start your stretching before I have to embarrass *you* .”

Their blond friend rolled his eyes with another laugh, but did what he was told and walked over to the section of the gym with the treadmills. Ren took a few steps closer to her, which would have been fine any other day, but not after what she had done to him.

He reached out for her arm before she could take one step away. “That was a lot of fun. I would totally suffer bruises or back pains just to do that all over again.”

“S-Stop it.” Her head dropped to her chest. “W-What did you learn?”

“Well,” he whispered, leaning his head to be closer to her. “That girl who’s been going to Shinjuku. Her name is Eiko. She’s a third year like you. So, maybe you know who she is.”

Did she know who Eiko was? Kind of. She knew *who* she was, but that was about it. How in the world Ren had managed to find anything out when she had failed, she hadn’t a clue, but now she could head back into that area with more confidence.

…Assuming her dad would go with her. He would, right? Because someone at her school was trapped, willingly or not, and that was what he was *good* at. How would he sleep at night if he knew a classmate of hers was in trouble and he didn’t do anything to help?

“Do you need me to walk you home?”

Makoto dared to smirk at Ren, something that he noticed *immediately.* “Does it look like I need you to take me home?”

His hand rubbed at the back of his head and he didn't comment back, for once. She grabbed the rest of her stuff, threw her sweater over her head, but stopped when she was standing next to him again. "Have a good night, Ren."

"Let me know when you get home at least?"

His eyes were shining and she could only offer him a quick nod. She *hated* how he had that ability to shut her mind down to the point she couldn't say a simple *word* .

But, she was home too fast for her liking. It was nice, however, seeing her mom in the kitchen again and her dad sitting on the couch with his phone. It was like nothing ever happened. Had she dreamt the conversation? Was he making a joke? He sounded serious, but maybe she was being dramatic.

Makoto sat herself down next to him, trying to keep the nervousness out of her tone. "Um. S-So…" She cleared her throat when her dad looked over at her. "I know who that girl is. The one who's going to Kabukicho."

His phone lowered to his lap. "You did some investigating, I see."

Was that a good thing or a bad thing? "I…I was kind of hoping…w-we could…y-you know, go back?"

Makoto held her breath. If he said yes, then she had imagined the night before. If he said no, she wouldn't know what to do. She could try and go by herself, but her dad would get mad at her and Ren might, too. But they had already come this far. He couldn't back out now.

"Alright."

She thought she was going to explode. "R-Really?"

"You'd go without me at this point," he said, dropping a hand on her head. "And you were far too excited to be out and about last time. You need to work on hiding that or you'll scare everyone away."

She threw her arms around him and hugged him tightly. "Thank you,

Dad."

But before she went to her room for the night, her mom pulled her into the living room. Her dad walked off to his room, either to go to bed or work on something (because he wasn't retiring. He just needed to heal first.)

"Make sure you watch over him tomorrow, okay?"

Makoto looked back at her in surprise. "What do you mean?"

A sad smile came to her mom's face. "He's different, Makoto. He's hiding it very well, but I know better."

"I-Is he…" She paused because she was suddenly feeling trapped in her own home. Her dad wasn't giving up. He could still fight. He was still strong. He was still willing to teach her what he knew…

"Just…promise me."

Tears soon filled her eyes. "I-Is he…is he quitting?"

When her mom sighed deeply, Makoto didn't need an answer. Her mom's grip tightened on her hand. "I don't know. He's suffered so much backlash these last few weeks and I think it's starting to get to him."

She promised her mom she would keep her dad safe, then promised herself that she would bring him back. Makoto knew it had to be hard dealing with all the pressure, but it was because they wanted to break him. He was *too* good. He didn't do anything wrong to deserve such hatred from people he worked with, people that should have respected him.

She knew all too well what it was like to let a few bad experiences ruin everything. But she also knew that he was the voice for *thousands* of people in the city. If he truly thought about giving up, those people, *innocent* people, would suffer.

She wouldn't allow that.

Makoto was quick to return home from school the next day, a little

too eager, but Ren didn't say anything about it as he took her home. Once she was inside the apartment, her eyes scanned the room for her dad. She didn't see him in the kitchen, or the living room, or-

"If you're too excited, someone is going to get the better of you."

She had to throw a hand over her mouth to quiet her scream. Struggling to catch her breath, she turned to find her dad grinning at her. "Rule number three, never leave your back unguarded. Check your surroundings before pushing yourself forward. Being too focused on your end goal leaves you wide open."

She growled at him. "I hate you."

He shrugged his shoulders. "I could have had a knife, or a gun, and you would have been killed."

Her heart finally returned to beating at a normal pace, but she sure as hell took his advice into consideration. "Maybe next time, I'll attack *you* ."

"Oh?" He smirked at her. "I thought it was a felony to assault a police officer?"

But you're not anymore, are you? The thought made her shoulders sink and her head drop. "Y-Yes…"

Either he didn't catch her reaction or assumed she felt guilty about bringing him harm. "Now. Go get ready for work, trainee."

Makoto was quick to do what he said (she got to keep the uniform for doing such a great job on day one) and they were both out the door soon after. She kept wanting to ask him if he was serious about retiring or if he was just injured and assumed it was time or if he was feeling *forced* because no one liked him…

"Rule number four, no daydreaming when you're on the job."

To make it seem like she wasn't lost in her thoughts, she shook her head and did what he had told her to do before. *Back straight. Eyes up. Don't smile.* It was so much easier to do this time around, because she *had* to do it right. She *had* to prove to her dad that she

still needed his help, just like so many other people did…

She felt a hand on her shoulder and it stopped her from moving forward. “What’s wrong with you?”

Great. Now she was worrying her dad. And he would take her home. And she would fail getting through to him. “I…I’m just…nervous.”

“Everyone is nervous when they first start, so don’t worry too much.” He gave her shoulder a light pat. “Rule number five, don’t ever think it’s a bad thing to feel afraid. Use your fear to make your decisions. If you don’t think you can do something alone, don’t, and ask for help. If you are afraid your decisions will hurt your team, or the public, then ask for help. Never let yourself become immobile because of your fears, but never think it’s a *bad* thing, okay?”

If he had told her this back home, she probably would have started crying. *Back straight. Eyes up. Don’t smile* …

She nodded once. “O-Okay…”

He didn’t say much else to her as they continued on to Kabukicho. After they walked underneath the gaudy street sign, her dad stopped her once again.

And threw her a curveball. “You’ve done most of this investigating. So you go talk to people.”

…Didn’t he *just* tell her if she was afraid, she could ask for help? “B-But…I…I-I don’t know if I can.”

“You won’t know until you try.” He must have caught the look of horror on her face. “Look, Makoto, I’ll be right behind you. That was rule number one, remember?”

Her hands clasped together in front of her. “Y-You also told me not to talk…”

“ *Much* , is what I said.” He grabbed her shoulders and turned her to face down the street away from him. “If you can’t ask what you need to ask in less than ten words, you’re wasting your time. Get right to the point. Criminals tend to be caught off guard when you don’t beat

around the bush."

She didn't have a choice. She reminded herself that if she didn't prove her growth to her dad, there would be no chance to convince him to fight back. So, she straightened her back, narrowed her eyes, and nodded her head.

The first man she spoke to regarding Eiko had been extremely intimidating. She kept her question simple, concise, and the man still scowled at her until she was sure she was going to break in half under the tension. She was highly disappointed when the man finally caved and told her he had no idea what she was talking about.

A few other conversations went much the same way, even if she was getting better about acting natural. Her dad wasn't really by her side as much as he was watching her from a distance, but she was proud of herself so far. She hadn't snapped at anyone. She hadn't started crying and gone running back to him. She didn't just say *I give up* and walked on home…

It *was* getting late, and she did have school in the morning, and if she saw her dad stop walking because his leg was bothering him *one more time* , she was going to take him home. The *last* thing she wanted was for him to be pushing himself for her sake, regardless of whether or not finding Eiko was exciting and important.

Makoto saw her come out of a club when she made a move to walk back to her dad and tell him it was time to go home. Eiko came out with a long haired well-dressed man, but they were too far away for her to hear what they were talking about. They both looked happy. They were both giggling and Eiko was smacking the other guy next to her playfully, almost like they were *dating* .

Were they?

She could worry about that later. As of now, Eiko didn't appear to be in any danger. Her dad was hurting, so she had to take care of him first. He didn't seem too thrilled when she walked up next to him. "Your prime suspect is getting away."

"And my dad is hurt." She ignored him when he huffed in

annoyance. “You shouldn’t have come out here if you were in pain.”

“And *you* ,” he started as he rolled his shoulders. “Should be more focused. If this was a serious case, you just let a dangerous criminal get away.”

Now she was getting angry. “You should get off of your leg.” She grabbed his hand, against his wishes, and wrapped it over her shoulder. From a distance, he didn’t seem like he was in all that much pain. But now, right next to him, *feeling* his strain as he walked with her help, she called herself an idiot. He couldn’t walk without limping or putting pressure on her shoulder. All she wanted to do was find Eiko and tell her to stop hanging out in a dangerous area…

But who was she to tell someone not to associate with someone else?

Her dad ended up taking the lead and walking her to a familiar establishment. She had been to the bar once, back when she took her dad’s friends to Sae’s palace, but it was close, and her dad needed to rest before she took him home or her mom would *kill* her.

The bartender lady…person smiled warmly at her and brought her a glass of something and another glass of something else she pushed in front of her dad. The booth was comfortable. The bar was quiet. She oddly felt much more at ease.

“There’s no alcohol in yours, sweetie,” the bartender said with a smile. She watched her dad grab at his drink and down in the next second. “ *He* only gets one more.”

Makoto tried to smile politely as the bartender walked away, but it wasn’t long before her dad sighed like he was irritated. “Alright. What’s wrong with you?”

“Huh?” Was he mad? Did she do something wrong? Was he seriously upset with her because she chose to worry about his well-being over that of a classmate? “W-What do you mean?”

“You’ve been distracted all night.” He twisted in his seat to get more comfortable. “Why?”

Boy, he was really good about being *direct* . “I-I told you…I was…I was nervous…”

He threw his hands over his face and exhaled deeply. “You’re not a very good liar, Makoto. So. I’ll ask you again. Why are you distracted?”

“I-Is this because I *helped* you?”

“You just let a criminal walk away because you thought I needed your help.”

Her hands clenched under the table. “And how many more criminals are *you* going to let get away because *you* think *I’m* weak?”

There was a cold and chilling silence that followed her question. She couldn’t sit still long enough to wait for him to answer. “I…I overheard you…the other day…s-saying you wanted to…to retire. But you can’t, Dad. Because so many people still need you to fight. I still need you to fight. If you really do stop, all those people are going to suffer. Kids like Ryuji will never have their story heard. Kids like Ren are going to keep facing a punishment they don’t deserve because no one *cares* . Kaneshiro would have…he would have…”

She told herself not to cry, but she couldn’t stop now. She had no idea how she managed to find her voice. “You’re my dad, but you’re also my hero. I want to be just like you, even when times are hard. So yes, I let one bad guy slip under my radar this time, because if I let *you* slip away, then so many more criminals would get away with crimes you’ve spent your career trying to stop.”

When Makoto found the courage to open her eyes, she found her dad leaning into his hands propped up on the table. It was hard to tell if he was hurting or if he was angry or if he was sad. In her silence, the bartender dropped another glass in front of her dad, then placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. She didn’t say anything to her, but the look in her eyes told Makoto that she was doing well, she should be proud, and everything would be okay.

“Makoto.” She was suddenly not ready for her dad to talk. “You don’t understand. I’m getting older, not younger. I can barely walk without

being in pain. But you're asking me to stand up to the man who threatened to kill my family for what? Pride? Recognition? To put an end to crime all together?"

It was never easy standing up to her dad. But she had to. She *had* to. Even if she had been threatened and the thought scared her… "I'm asking you to stand up for what's *right* . Because nothing in this world will ever change if the bad guys always *win* ."

He threw himself back into his seat. His laugh did nothing to calm her. "I'm *one* man, Makoto. There's no way in hell that I can-,"

"You're one man with a million hearts behind you. I think that's pretty powerful." She wiped at her eyes. "Just like how one man was all it took for you to close your ears to them."

Her dad didn't say another word to her. Makoto figured that maybe she had overstepped her boundaries and upset him. Yet an hour later, when he hadn't touched his second drink, she knew he was angry or thinking. Preferably the latter. If he was thinking, she hoped she had gotten through to him and he was at least giving his decision some more thought.

It was an awkward ride back home. She tried to remember she was still in uniform, so she had to act the part until they were home. *Back straight. Eyes up. Don't smile* . Granted she didn't have much to smile over, it was hard to keep her eyes up and her back straight because someone she loved and respected had truly lost heart.

They both stepped out of Ebisu Station in silence. It was chilly that night, but the air was much too thick and heavy for her liking. She didn't always like when her dad argued with her, her mom, her sister, but she would rather hear his voice than nothing at all.

Finally, *finally* , she heard it. "Stop, Makoto."

Back straight. Eyes up. Don't smile . "Y-Yes?"

He pulled her hat from under her arm and dropped it on her head. The act made her heart leap into her throat, and her face warmed when he got it to fit just right. "I wish I knew what to say to you."

Back straight. Eyes up. Don't smile . "A-Are you mad at me?"

The hand on her head dropped to her shoulder and he pushed her into him. She felt tears in her eyes when he held her against him tightly. "I'm terrified, to be honest."

She pushed him away, much to his surprise. *Back straight. Eyes up. Don't cry.* "Rule number five, don't ever think it's a bad thing to feel afraid. If you're afraid, ask for help. You have friends, Dad. You have people who will support you. And I hope one day, you'll feel confident enough to ask me to help you, too."

He smiled at her and she broke rule number one. "You've grown up, Makoto. Just when I don't think it's possible to be any more proud, here I am." He flicked at the bill of her cap, probably to bring a smile back to her face instead of a frown before she *wept* like a baby.

Makoto buried her face into his chest. "Please don't give up, Dad."

His arms wrapped around her and he squeezed her. "Then don't stop studying, trainee."

She would never stop studying.

Chapter 109

Chapter 109

Akihiko stared at the ceiling with no desire to fall asleep.

Not that the past few nights that he *had* tried to sleep hadn't been plagued with terrifying nightmares, but his mind was running away with him and he didn't try and stop it.

He didn't want Makoto to be a cop. He didn't. It scared the hell out of him. He didn't want her to see the same thing he saw in his lifetime, deal with the same corruption that would put a target on her back, spend every night unable to sleep because she couldn't *save* someone. He didn't want her to lose that innocent part of herself that made her *her* over a *job* .

But she was so happy to be out and about with him. She spoke with a determination he had never seen in her until the moment she told him to think about his future. For the first time in his life, Akihiko saw his daughter as an *adult* and not a child. While the thought scared him, he couldn't even begin to explain how proud he was at the same time.

And that led him straight into asking himself: what *was* he going to do? Even if Makoto told him the entire world would stand behind him, it was too late. The past few years had been nothing but a test of his patience. He couldn't even think of the last thing that had gone *right* for him. It sounded cynical, because he still had Minako and Makoto and his friends, but his work life had fallen apart. Those who hated him in the shadows years before this mess now hounded him on a daily basis. Criminals he wanted and *tried* to arrest were ignored no matter *how* damning the evidence.

But of course, *he* was the bad guy. A terrorist. A murderer…

Did that mean he wasn't going to be miserable thinking about all the people who still needed someone to take a stand for them? Of course. Regardless of his decision, he was going to suffer. And at

the moment, he knew he could at least suffer and be *happy* with his family rather than a system that tried to bury him at every turn.

Sae would be thrilled to never have to see him again. Makoto would probably be pissed and never want to see him again. Minako at least seemed to understand that he was trapped and humored him when he took her out the other day.

He had no right to ask for the chance to be the husband and father he hadn't been for years, but Minako always told him it was better than *nothing* .

Despite feeling like his mind was made up, he could *not* bring himself to walk into work and drop a formal letter of resignation on his boss's desk. Or drop by and tell him, *fuck you I'm done* . At the moment, Akihiko was taking his doctor seriously (for once) and resting, to a degree. Until he was cleared, he would take that time to think, and make his final decision then.

Sadly, he figured if he didn't try and talk himself out of retiring *now* , he was going to. Unless Minako threatened him, or Makoto told him she would walk out of his life like her sister did years prior.

He was exhausted, but when the first ray of light came through the window, he was up like it was any other day. It was going to be a hard habit to break, but he figured there was no harm in keeping his routine the same. Minako continued to sleep peacefully and he sure as hell wasn't about to wake her. There would be plenty of time in his soon-to-be long day that he could spend time with her. At least someone deserved a good night's rest.

But he couldn't go for a run. He couldn't go to the gym. He couldn't head into work early. All he really could do was fall asleep on the couch or tidy up or attempt to make breakfast since Makoto wasn't up quite yet. He at least started his usual cup of coffee, knowing it wouldn't be Sakura's coffee, and he didn't really need to stay awake, so he really didn't have a reason to drink it…

He suddenly felt extremely *helpless* . His job was his life. If it wasn't his job, it was training. And now that he couldn't do either for a while, he had *nothing* . He was sure when Minako was up and moving that

he could take her out again, before everything around him started to *suffocate* him.

“D-Dad?”

Akihiko turned to find Makoto slowly making her way into the kitchen. Her eyes tried to see around him, and once they landed on the coffee maker, she released a breath. He tried not to think about what it meant. “What?”

She stepped up next to him and smiled softly. “I was worried you were trying to make breakfast, and I would prefer not to die today.”

Her tone at least sparked something in him. “I told you before, if I wanted to kill you, I would break your bones, not poison you.”

She waved her hand with a chuckle. “You wouldn’t *purposely* try and kill us with your cooking. But we would die regardless.”

Before he had a chance to snap back at her, or to fall into another moment of panic at the thought of them *dying* , Makoto lightly punched him in the stomach. “But I can teach you! So until you get better, you can practice.”

It was a touching thought, but Akihiko knew he didn’t *want* to learn because Minako and Makoto both prided themselves on it. However, he also knew that it wasn’t just about cooking. He could spend more time with Makoto before she left for college. He could keep talking to her about her future. He could give her more pointers, answer her questions, spend *time* with her.

“If you don’t mind me burning the house down, then sure.”

Makoto laughed into her hand. “I’ll make sure Mom is with you at all times so she can put out the fires.”

She all but pushed him out of the kitchen and to his usual spot at the table. She told him she would handle breakfast and the only thing he was allowed to do was grab his coffee. While Makoto had been very demanding and vocal as a child, she had lost a lot of that when she started going to school. Strange as it was to admit, he missed that part of her, and it was nice to see that it wasn’t *gone* from her

personality.

When she had a plate ready for him and on the table, Makoto pulled out a seat and sat down in front of her own. Akihiko watched her carefully, trying not to be obvious, but she didn't make a move for her chopsticks and start eating. The seconds turned into minutes in silence, neither one of them moving, until Makoto inhaled deeply and released her breath.

"So. Um…" She paused to wipe her hands against her uniform skirt. Akihiko almost called her out on it. "Well…I-I don't mean to…k-keep bothering you…"

"Makoto." She was nervous, and he likely knew what she wanted to ask, but he wanted her to be more confident. Like she had been the night before, the past few days, weeks really. "Stop that."

She exhaled loudly, her hands remaining on her lap. "Are you seriously going to retire?"

He fell back in his chair, suddenly not hungry, even if he knew that was the question she had been wanting to ask. "I don't know." She didn't move or make any indication she had heard him. "Are you going to hate me if I do?"

It wasn't a fair question to ask her, but a small part of him worried that this would be the line he would cross with her and she would walk out of his life like Sae had done years ago. Makoto's reaction was what he expected; wide eyes, pale complexion, several seconds of hesitation. It only made him feel a little better.

"W-What? N-No! I would never hate you, Dad." She was unable to keep eye contact with him, then she returned to her early position with a frown on her face. "I wouldn't hate you, and I wouldn't be disappointed. I kind of know how it feels to be trapped and you have nowhere else to go, and maybe giving in is the easiest course sometimes."

It was his turn to sigh. "I don't *want* to, but yeah. I'm tired. These past few years have been a test and I think I'm a little too old to be dealing with all of this now."

His comment at least pulled a smile out of her. “I don’t think you’re old, Dad. But I know you worry a lot, and that you’re hurt, and that you want to keep us safe and happy. I just still feel like you could do so much more and I hate that one man had the capability to do this to you.”

He hated talking about work related troubles with Minako, so he sure as hell didn’t want to unleash that burden on his daughter. But he couldn’t stop himself. “I’m tired, Makoto. It wasn’t just one man. It’s been several people. Those above me are probably the ones who have it out for me the most, but every time I try and get around them, I get jammed up with something else. Kamoshida. Kaneshiro. The Phantom Thieves. It doesn’t end, and it keeps getting worse. And if I’m to blame anyone, it’s me. My decision to keep you all a secret has come back to bite me, so maybe this is what I get for doing this to you.”

“Don’t.” The frown was replaced with a glare, but her eyes remained down to her untouched breakfast. “I hate when you think this is your fault. And even if you feel that way, I’m glad you did what you did. For me and Sis and Mom. Because if you didn’t, my life might be completely different. I’m happy with who I’ve become. I have a dream to be just like you, and I wouldn’t have come this far if you hadn’t been swayed into keeping us a secret.”

She was growing up right before his eyes. While it was nice to see that image of a happy little girl playing with her toys, it was another feeling entirely hearing her talk the way she had. He wasn’t talking to his daughter, but someone who had been his best friend for years. Someone who wasn’t afraid to straighten him out when he needed a good slap to the face.

She reminded him so much of Minako that it was kind of intimidating. “You’re happy, huh?”

Makoto made a move for her meal while keeping her eyes down. “Yes, Dad. Now I want you to be happy.”

“Talking to you like this is doing just that,” he said with a weak smile. “I really appreciate it.”

The silence that fell over them while they ate wasn't too terribly uncomfortable, but Akihiko desperately wanted to say something to her. He was proud of her, sure, but there was only so many times he could tell her as much before it lost its meaning. And without anything else to fall back on, he turned to the only conversation topic he could think of.

"So. Have you spoken to that girl at school yet?"

Makoto's eyes immediately found his, then she lowered the chopsticks to her holder. "Um. N-No…not yet."

He decided to use her hesitation against her to try and lighten the mood. "Hey now. A good cop doesn't wait for the moment to come to them. They sometimes have to *make* it happen. The longer you put it off, the more trouble this girl might fall into."

"R-Right," she muttered quietly with a nod of her head. "I've just been…b-busy…I guess."

Right. He had been so preoccupied with himself and his own personal problems that he forgot about Makoto doing her Phantom Thief business. Akihiko rarely spoke to her about what she was doing, but he was intrigued at the same time. Hell, if his friends could do the same thing her friends were doing, they could go after a lot of corrupt criminals. And that was his *job* to take down bad guys…

Maybe even Shido himself.

"What are the Phantom Thieves doing?"

He noticed her tense, never being asked point-blank before, but he started to grow worried about what her reaction meant. Were they getting into trouble? Last he had heard, everyone loved them and what they were doing. Akechi was pretty much forced into hiding. So he could only assume her nervousness was due to him being so curious about it.

"Um." She paused, likely trying to come up with an answer that wasn't the truth *nor* a lie, but a quick look from him made her

shoulders drop. “We’re still changing those who need it. Right now, we’re…um, helping a friend of ours…”

She was being evasive, but he allowed her to be this time. “Do you think if my friends and I came with you guys a few times to see how you operate, that we could go around and do the same thing?”

There was no way in hell he would ask Makoto and her friends to go after Shido, but if he wanted any sort of peace of mind, even if he *gave up* , he had to do this. Mitsuru would be furious, but if Shido went down, a hundred more would follow after him. Since no one could change the heart of the *system* , Shido was the next best thing.

He would go alone if he had to.

“You mean…you have someone you want to change?” Something clicked in her head and he cursed under his breath. “Is it the guy who kidnapped you?”

He ran a hand through his hair. “Look, I really don’t approve of you and your friends doing what you’re doing already. People think you’re the same terrorist going around causing the mental shutdowns. And there’s far too many bad guys out in the world for me to believe you mean to take them all out.”

“Dad…”

He held up a hand to stop her. “But I understand. I know that you’ve been given a gift and you don’t want to waste it and you’re doing what you can with it. But if you really want to have a future, you need to stop. I’m not worried about anyone finding out who you are, but you’re going to be consumed with your missions until it’s all you think about. And the last thing I want you to have to do is lose someone precious to you for you to get that wake up call.”

The second the words were off his tongue, he dropped his head. He didn’t want to freak Makoto out, nor did he want to bring up the *one* part of his life he never wanted to think about, but it slipped out. If she didn’t stop now, or soon, too many people would be demanding action. Too many people would cry for help. Too many people would

pull her and her friends away from the path of life they wanted just to solve a crisis that would never end…

“Thank you.”

When he looked back up at Makoto, she had a small smile on her face. “You’re right,” she continued on. “Sometimes I feel overwhelmed by what we are asked to do, but as I know how to help, I feel obligated to do so. But perhaps instead of picking up a million leaves off the ground, I need to take down the tree.”

He had something to say to that, but when he opened his mouth, nothing came out.

She chuckled at him. “I know I’ve told you before that you’ve been a wonderful influence, both in and out of your job, but maybe in order to truly make a difference, I need to think about being more than just a cop. Maybe if I try and…b-be like…your boss or something, I could help you and others like you take down trees rather than block them off.”

“You…” He paused, trying to make sense of what she was really saying “You want to be my *boss?”*

“W-Well,” she said quietly, her face turning a shade of pink. “You told me that your bosses have kept you down. And you’re probably not the only one. I can’t say I will get to that position any time soon, nor would I ever be *your* boss, but if you want something done right, do it yourself… Right?”

He was a mix of a million emotions and all he could do was laugh. “I mean…I guess?” He leaned back into his chair again. “From student council president to police commissioner? That’s a hell of a jump.”

A frown came over her face before he had a chance to correct himself. “Do you think I won’t be any good?”

“N-No…” He wiped his face with his hands before he spoke again. “Makoto, I think you would do just fine. Honestly. However, you still have a lot to learn. So maybe instead of focusing all your time on tackling problems meant for police, you should spend your time

studying and learning everything you can to better yourself for the future of your generation and those to come."

She smiled a little too brightly at him. "Well. Then I guess you can't retire, because if I'm going to learn, I'm going to learn from the best."

Makoto pushed her chair back and took her empty plate to the kitchen before he had a chance to say anything to her. She was even out the door with a quick goodbye and he still couldn't find the words to say. He assumed it was pretty selfish of him to ask her to stop taking care of problems *he* could take care of if he really wanted to quit. But she was young, and her group of friends shouldn't be tasked with bringing bad guys to their knees. They had lives to live, a future to dream about. It wasn't fair to them…

"So, I see Makoto's giving you a lot to think about."

Akihiko slightly jumped in his seat while Minako came up to the table with a smile on her face. He tried to ignore her and finish his breakfast, but once he knew her eyes were on him, it was hard to think about anything else. "I-I…I don't know…"

"I think you should go back to work, too."

Months ago, Minako had almost begged him to retire, to stay at home, to enjoy what was left of their lives together. Granted it was more to keep him *safe* rather than in a hospital bed, it still didn't explain why she *now* wanted him to go back to work.

She must have picked up on his thoughts and added, "You're not yourself, Aki. I know I asked you a while back to think about it, but after seeing what it would do to you, I don't like it. I don't like seeing you so miserable, and then trying to *fake* it so you can make us happy."

He exhaled deeply. "Yeah. Fine. I've been miserable. But I'm just going to stay miserable. If I stay home and enjoy my time with you and Makoto, then I can at least be somewhat happy. If I go back, nothing will change, things will get worse, and I'm going-,"

"Stop, honey." Minako pulled out a chair at the table, then reached

for the hand by his plate. “You’re going to suffer more if you give up because you’re going to *regret* it. All those kids that you’ve saved, think of what they would have become had you not helped them. Then think of all the other kids that need someone to reach out to them. Who are they going to turn to if you don’t go back?”

“That’s not my problem.”

Minako squeezed his hand. “No, maybe not. You clearly never did all of this on your own. But just as one man was enough to scare you into giving up, one child without someone to talk to is all it will take to *crush* you.”

He hated how she made it sound so *easy* , but also hated that she was right. If word ever got back to him about a child that needed his help and he wasn’t there for them and something happened to them, it would crush him.

His face dropped into his free hand the next second. “Yeah. You’re right. But for so long, my entire time with you, my job has meant everything to me. That’s why I asked you to keep your name. That’s why I lost my daughter. And now you’re asking me to go back?”

“I am,” she said with a warm smile and a glint in her eyes. It usually meant she was right and he *knew* it. “Because whether or not I’ve made it clear to you, your desire to protect people is what I fell in love with. The last thing I ever want is for some bad tough guy to take that part of you away. I’m not asking you to go back just to catch him and throw him in prison. If you want to stay away from him, fine. But don’t let him *win* .”

Minako released his hand and pushed her chair back to stand up. She was behind him a moment later, placing her hands on his shoulders and trying to ease the tension out of his muscles. “I don’t want Makoto to be a cop…”

He heard her soft laughter behind him. “She’s going to do this whether or not you approve.” Her hands tightened against his shoulders. He really could have fallen asleep. “So who is she going to learn from? The people that kick at you when you’re down and save no one, or a man who doesn’t let adversity pull him under and

saves all he can?”

If Makoto seriously wanted to follow in his footsteps, then he sure as hell wouldn’t let his superiors or those like him get to his daughter. Makoto had a great heart. She truly wanted to help people. She wanted to help people to the point she forgot about herself.

There must have been a change in his posture as Minako dropped her head to the crook of his neck. “If you want to teach her well, you’re going to have to get better.”

Akihiko was never one to *rest* , but if he was truly going to help Makoto be someone she could be *proud* of, then he would take all the rest he could get.

Chapter 110

Chapter 110

Minako didn't know whether to be happy or nervous as she sat in the doctor's office with Akihiko.

She was happy that he had been willing to go talk to the doctor, to see what all he could fix so Akihiko could be back on the streets helping Makoto and/or working. While he hadn't made an official decision just yet, Minako could tell he was weighing his options and leaning more towards going back to work. It elated her, especially when Makoto had been more of the push Akihiko needed than she had been. It made her realize just how much Makoto had grown up and how much Akihiko wanted her to be strong and happy.

It was just her first time really out in public with someone who *knew* Akihiko well enough to question who she was. He had been to the same doctor ever since his first "accident" as a rookie. Mitsuru hooked them up, telling her he was a good friend, and that Akihiko's secret would be safe with him. That was all it took for Akihiko, but Minako had to wonder how *much* the doctor knew, if Akihiko had told him, if she had made too much of a scene in the past and he just *knew* , or if he had no idea whatsoever.

"You don't need to be so nervous."

Minako sat in silence for a moment, then breathed out a laugh. "Sorry." She looked over to Akihiko, whose eyes were lowered to his hands, telling her he was just as nervous as she was, but for a different matter altogether. "Does he know about me?"

He turned his head to eye her curiously. "The doctor?" When she nodded in response, his head fell with his exhale. "No. I don't think so. No one has really ever been here with me. B-But don't worry." In a quick motion, he grabbed her hand. "I'll tell him the truth."

A part of her wanted to tell him it wasn't that big of a deal while the other part of her was eager to see how he would handle the situation

should it come up. However, that wasn't why they were there, so she latched on to his hand and gave him a gentle squeeze.

"We're here to see what he can do for you so you can get back to work. If he doesn't ask, we don't need to tell him."

He sighed again. "I thought you wanted people to know?"

"Aki." She waited until he was looking at her again. "I don't want you to *deny* it. If no one asks, then fine. And besides, we aren't here to talk to him about the two of us being together."

"R-Right…"

That was when she noticed how nervous he was. Akihiko had been in the hospital many times, but he was never *nervous* . Was he worried that the doctor would clear him right now, given he hadn't been able to *walk* without support on his way to the office? Or was he worried the doctor was going to tell him that he would lose his leg if he wanted to go back to work before he *died?*

Sadly, when the door opened and the doctor (she thought) came into the room, Akihiko's hand tightened in hers. She hoped he wasn't nervous about him finding out who she was, because if Mitsuru approved of him, Minako doubted he would care one way or the other. It made her heart hurt knowing that she could comfort him easily if his anxiety was about coming clean with a man he had known for a while. If he was nervous about what the doctor would tell him, Minako didn't think she could calm him half as well…

"I understand you had to have support to get here, but to think you would use a beautiful woman to get that job done…" The doctor shook his head with a smile. "I am beyond disappointed, Sanada."

She could *feel* Akihiko roll his eyes as he released her hand. "Look. I just need to know how bad my injury is so I can figure out when I can get up and moving without pain again."

Two things hit her: one, he seemed very determined to be mobile again, and that made her very happy. Two, she now knew he was worried the doctor would tell him he would never walk again and that

thought filled her with fear. She would support him, of course, but how much more of himself was he going to lose if he was told really bad news? If he lost any more of that spirit that made him *him* , then she would rather the doctor say nothing…

They had yet to do any tests or take x-rays or anything, so she didn't expect the doctor to have an answer. However, the man chuckled and sat himself down on the chair across from them. "Seriously? No matter what I tell you, you're gonna charge out of here like I told you that you were perfectly fine."

Minako had to smile at that, but Akihiko only tensed next to her. "R-Right…"

"But I'm assuming your knee is why you're here, yes?"

Akihiko's head fell to his chest and she worried that maybe he was faking being okay a lot longer than she thought… "Yeah. It just hurts a lot. I figured you could tell me how to fucking walk again…"

He rarely swore in front of her, or others, unless he was really upset. Her heart fell to her stomach. How had she not pushed him to see a doctor sooner? He usually walked with a limp, but covered it up well. If he was sitting down, he had his leg stretched out. Little signs, but she never realized what it meant until now…

The doctor, however, only laughed. "You pick up one foot, then the other, then repeat."

She saw Akihiko's scowl and tried not to let him see her smile. The doctor spoke back up before either of them could. "Well, the last time you were here was for therapy after you were shot. The seasonal changes can make you a little sore, but not sore enough that you require *help* ."

"So help me."

Akihiko's voice was so quiet and timid that it made her *hurt* . "Why don't you tell me what you've done to warrant a trip back when I figured you would be fine."

She watched as Akihiko dropped his face into his hands. Minako

wasn't sure she *wanted* to know, even if she could guess, but hearing it from him would make it so much worse…

"I was arrested a few weeks ago. They knew I was hurt and yeah, they liked to kick at my knee and stomp on it and stick needles in it while I was handcuffed to a damn chair." Minako tried to comfort him with a hand on his leg, but whether or not he noticed her, she didn't know. "I doubt I've been well ever since, but then I'm held at gunpoint and kicked at again so I'm sure that didn't *help* ."

Minako shot a glance to the doctor, who appeared to be taking the news well and simply writing things down. "The needle might have torn something. I know you usually enjoy ignoring me, but I can't really say much more unless we get some pictures." The man stood, oddly avoiding eye contact with her, then wrote something else down. "So, if you have the time, I'd like to see what's going on."

Next to her, Akihiko nodded, then lowered one of his hands to cover her own. Once the doctor left the room to call for a nurse, she leaned up against him. "You're going to be okay, Aki. He will fix whatever's wrong and you'll be back to training Makoto like nothing ever happened."

A smile did not show itself on his face. "Yeah. I hope so."

One of the things she hated about him was that sometimes, he closed up and didn't talk to her about how he was feeling. He thought he was *weak* , or *annoying* , or that she would hate him if he spoke up. And for the past few months, that's how he had been. Holding back his pain so they would believe he was fine. Keeping his anger hidden so she wouldn't be afraid of his outbursts and have that upset him even more. Trying to act like he was *fine* when he was falling apart over his *job* …his *life…*

It was hard to try and tell him to cheer up, so she didn't. She only sat next to him, turning her hand over to weave her fingers through his, and rest her head against his shoulder. She knew that sometimes, words didn't do as much as physical touches, so she hoped he understood that she was there…

The next hour was a mix between waiting in the room and helping

Akihiko get around. The doctor was kind enough to hurry him in for a few scans of his leg, then promptly returned with whatever news he had. Akihiko gripped her hand like a lifeline, which once again brought back all of her self-anger and regrets to her heart.

He shouldn't be suffering like this. He should never have had to suffer in silence. He should never have been pushed against a wall and told to make a decision when he was in so much *pain* …

"So. How bad is it?"

Akihiko was nervous and it was clear in his tone. However, the doctor sighed and fell into the vacant seat. Minako braced herself for the worst. "I wish I could tell you there was good news, but, it's not *terrible* . If you want to walk pain free again, it's possible, but you're going to need surgery. The beat down and the puncture wound have agitated your wound and tore a few ligaments in your knee. The X-ray shows fragments of bone in your cartilage. I'm very impressed by the fact you're not in more pain when you're just *standing* ."

She heard Akihiko sigh heavily, but he said nothing. Granted it wasn't *good* news, and the surgery would put him out for a few weeks maybe, there was *hope* .

"I can get you in as soon as I can, but know that you'll probably be out for a good month to recover fully." The doctor rose to his feet, jotting down a note or two on his clipboard. "The choice is up to you. But if I'm to offer any advice, I would recommend going through with it. Not just because you're my number one money maker, but I know the impact you have on the community. You'd be surprised how many people talk about you now that you're out of commission."

That caught her attention, but Akihiko still didn't seem as convinced as he needed to be. "Most of them probably want my head."

The doctor chuckled. "I can try to schedule you for sometime next week. The world needs more men like you, Sanada. And if I know how to help, I'm going to. But this is still your choice to make. Take some time if you need it."

Minako looked over at him as soon as the doctor left the room. "I-Is

that okay?”

He ran a hand through his hair, but the look on his face wasn’t a *good* one. “I don’t know. If I’m going to be out for another *month* , then why not just be out for good? I know you want me to go back, and Makoto wants me to go back, and I probably *should* go back, but a part of me just wants to watch the world burn at the same time…”

His tone killed the words on her tongue. Did he really think that? Or was he just venting after years of holding everything back? She knew better than to think he was serious, but she also knew he had been pushed and pushed and *hurt* for nothing.

Well. Makoto still needed guidance, and if Akihiko truly wanted to sit back and do nothing, she would turn out like every other cop that caved when the pressure got to be too much. He didn’t have to go into work, and he could help Makoto with his experiences alone, but she was still worried about *his* mental health at *giving up* .

“I’m sorry.”

The world came back into focus and she found Akihiko slowly coming to his feet next to her. “What?”

“I didn’t mean to make you worry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

She was quick to her feet and grabbed his arm to offer her support again. “Don’t be. I would rather you be open with me than keep all of your anger bottled up.”

He leaned against her more than she was ready for. He was at least able to catch himself before the rest of his weight knocked them both over. Once she righted herself and had him secured again, she turned to look up at him. “And if you really want to watch the world burn, Aki, then let it burn. But keep in mind that this world is also where our children live and still need to grow up. And I know it means a lot to you training Makoto to follow in your footsteps.”

Akihiko said nothing to her. He didn’t smile. He didn’t nod to her. He literally kept the scowl on his face the entire walk out of the office.

He told the clerk he would need time to think about his surgery, and the rest of the way home, she feared that maybe he was too far gone and nothing at this point would save him.

She couldn't keep depending on Makoto to be her saving grace. She *had* to try and get through to him. So once she had him sitting down on the living room couch a few hours later, she took the seat next to him.

"I don't care how you're feeling, but I want you to *tell* me." She moved to sit as close as she could to him, then grabbed the hand he was about to cover his face with. "If you're angry, tell me. If you're hurt, tell me. I'm tired of you thinking you have to carry all of your problems on your own because you deserve it."

He dropped his head, sighing in defeat, then spoke quietly. "I don't know. A part of me wants to go back, but if it's going to be the same bullshit, then I don't care. I want to help Makoto grow, but sometimes I'm worried I'm doing this so she won't walk out of my life like Sae did. I want you all to be happy. And at the same time, I can't make you happy without quitting. But both you and Makoto have told me not to, so I don't know what I need to do anymore."

He took a slow and steady breath. "I've hurt you and both of my kids. I feel like it's too late to say fuck it and act like I'm not terrified the wrong people will go after you guys. I feel like it's too late for me to try and stand up to the people that have gotten their way as of late in case that comes back on *you* . And I feel like the only reason I'm even considering going back is because Makoto will hate me if I don't. So I'm caught in the middle. Either way, I'm going to be miserable…"

She took a breath to calm herself, then reached over and grabbed his face with both hands. She had so much to say to him, but she was caught off guard by the *dead* look in his eyes. Akihiko always had a spark about him that was contagious, but it was gone. And it *killed* her.

All because of one man…

"I just want you to be happy," was all she was able to say before she

released him, stood up from the couch, and walked off into their room. Not that he likely took her exit in a positive light, but she couldn't sit there and watch him fall apart. She needed something to spark him back to life. It had to be her. Makoto needed to focus on school. Sae wouldn't come anywhere near the apartment again, and if she did, it wouldn't *help* .

Her friends were likely her only option for advice, but Mitsuru hadn't really made the situation better when she told Akihiko he was asking for trouble by doing whatever he was doing. No one else really *knew* him well enough that she felt comfortable leaving his well-being in their hands…

"M-Minako?"

She didn't have to look up at Akihiko to see the scared look on his face. It was better than the image she saw a few minutes ago. "I didn't mean to worry you. I just…" She tried her best to hide the tears that came to her eyes. "I just wish I knew how to help you. You always tell me that me being with you is enough, but it's not. This man broke you, and now I'm terrified I'll never get you back…"

He soon dropped to the bed beside her and wrapped her in his arms. "I know. I'm sorry. The last thing I ever want is to add to your suffering, but I-,"

She pushed off of him. "Stop it. We are not suffering. *You* are. And I don't know how many more times I have to tell you that no matter what you do, I will always love you. Makoto will always love you. So for once in your life, I want you to do what makes *you* happy."

Minako let him pull her back into him, but he remained silent for several more minutes. He was an overthinker. He cared too much about people. He wanted everyone to be happy when it wasn't possible. But he always tried. Maybe he was far too consumed with helping people that he could never stop. Now, thanks to the threat on all of them, he couldn't deal with the pressure.

"Just take this time to relax, Aki." The hand on her arm moved to her shoulder, then she felt him lean in and kiss the top of her head. It brought a smile to her face. "You're going to feel better when you

can walk around again, and maybe something will happen in the next few weeks that will make you understand how much people need you to fight."

He didn't respond to her, but she could tell by the way he was holding her that he would do just that.

Now she had to hope that something drastic happened to reignite that spark she desperately needed to see in him again.

Chapter 111

Chapter 111

She was nervous as hell, almost to the point she thought she was going to be sick.

Makoto had finally come face to face with Eiko, but all she managed to ask was for a moment of her time after school. Her classmate eyed her curiously, then shrugged her shoulders and told her she could stop by after class. She figured that would have been the hardest part of the mission…

As she sat in the student council room *waiting* , she panicked. How would Eiko react to being questioned? How would her dad have questioned her? Would he have been direct and to the point, or would he have been nice and friendly and opened her up that way? Eiko wasn't a *criminal* , so she couldn't be too hard on her, but any sign of weakness or intimidation would rub her the wrong way and Makoto would never get her information.

"You really need to relax."

Right.

Ren was with her.

That was not something she planned. Nor was it something she really wanted. Not that she was ungrateful, but now she had to figure out what Ren would do or say, or how Eiko would take his presence.

He had caught her shortly after she had spoken to Eiko during lunch. He (of course) knew she was up to something, and she figured it would be in her best interest not to lie to him. After she made the mistake of telling him she was slightly nervous about what she would do, he offered to be there with her. Moral support, or something like that.

In her defense, he had walked away long before she could tell him she would be fine on her own…

Makoto dried her hands on her skirt and looked back down at the small notebook she had opened in front of her. “S-Sorry…”

Ren reached over to place one of his hands over hers. “I’m sure if you talk to her like you talk to everyone else, things will go well. Trust me.”

He squeezed her hand for reassurance, but when he pulled away, she almost asked him to keep holding her hand. Soon after, there was a knock on the door, followed by Eiko’s voice to ask to enter. Makoto took a deep breath, gave permission, then clamped her hands together under the table.

“Please. Have a seat.”

So far so good. Eiko sure didn’t seem interested in staying for long, but Makoto knew herself well enough that if this meeting lasted more than ten minutes, something would have gone wrong anyway. Eiko perked up at the sight of Ren, then a small smile spread across her face.

“Wow, Prez. Hookin’ up with a criminal?”

Her face burned while Ren chuckled quietly next to her. “Oh, don’t mind me.” Thankfully, Ren left it at that, but Eiko was still very interested in why he was there.

“Are you guys seriously dating? For how long? Did you really knife someone back at your last school?”

Makoto coughed to clear her throat. “Um, I’ve brought you here to ask you a personal question.”

Again, Eiko didn’t appear attentive, so Makoto had to be direct. “Why do you spend your evenings in Kabukicho? That’s a very dangerous place for our age group to be in.”

The girl across from her rolled her eyes and pulled out her phone. It annoyed Makoto immensely. “Yeah, so what? Tell me somethin’ I

haven't heard before."

She had to stay composed. She couldn't lose focus. She had to report back to her dad successfully. Maybe that would cheer him up. "I saw you with a man twice your age. I hope you don't misunderstand my intentions, but I know how those men are. If you're in trouble, I want to help you."

"Wait, wait…" Eiko lowered her phone with a scowl. "You're telling *me* to stay away because *you* go there?"

Makoto hadn't been expecting the bitterness when she was just concerned for her safety. Maybe she was safe after all? But why did she still feel like something was *off?* "I…I went with a police officer to shadow him." She tightened her hands on her lap. "I had heard the rumors, so I kept my eyes open to see if I could find the Shujin student. You came out of a club, so naturally I worried about why you were there with an older man."

"Oh. My. *God!"*

She tensed at the shout, but Eiko's eyes were not on her or Ren, but on the table in front of them. "W-What?"

"Is that Buchimaru?!" Eiko reached across the table and grabbed Makoto's notebook and examined it carefully. "Oh my god it *is!* This came with one of the special edition stuffed animals years ago!"

Well, Makoto certainly hadn't anticipated Eiko being as much of a fan of Buchimaru as she was. However, it was hard not to keep the excitement hidden. "Um…y-yes! I got it for my birthday when it came out. I try not to write in the notebook unless it's for…serious cases, I guess…"

"I am seeing you in a different light now!" The other girl brought her phone back up to her face and seemingly scanned through something. "Here, here! Look at my collection!"

Never in her eighteen years of life had she met anyone who adored Buchimaru as much as she had. Eiko's collection was quite impressive, possibly rivalling her own, but she wouldn't tell her as

much.

“Let me see yours!”

“O-Oh!” Sadly, Makoto didn’t have a lot of pictures on her phone. She wasn’t camera friendly… But it was a good thing in the end. She didn’t have pictures of her family that someone could go through and find. She didn’t have any pictures of her and Ren that Eiko would have found and blabbed about it to the school. It made her sad at the same time, but she considered it for the best.

She had one of her and her family on her desk at home. One with her and Sis. And thanks to Ren, one of her and their friends when they were in Hawaii. (It was a terrible picture, but Ren had gone out of his way to get it for her, so she figured it would be rude not to put it on her desk…)

She had yet to answer Eiko. “S-Sorry. I actually don’t, um…have any pictures of Buchi on my phone.”

Eiko shrugged her shoulders again and leaned back into her seat. “Nah. It’s okay! If you give me your number, you can show me when you get home!”

This was *not* how the meeting should have gone, but it was kind of nice at the same time. She figured bonding over a childish interest would make the club situation much more easier to handle. And once Makoto passed over her number to Eiko, she tried to do just that.

“Um, I really hope that if anything is wrong with this guy you met, that you can come to me about it.”

And again, Eiko threw her for a loop. “You should totally meet him!”

“H-Huh?”

“Yeah! You and your *boyfriend* here! Well, I dunno. He might need to work on being cooler. Can you be cool for one day? For Mako?”

Mako?

That was when she looked over at Ren and he was biting back a smile. Probably a laugh too. She *did* just geek out over something very childish… “I need to be *cool?”*

Makoto tried to change the conversation. “Um…p-please just stay away from Kabukicho…a-and let me know if you need help!”

Then *Ren* had to throw her for a loop. “What?” He turned to her with a pout so unbelievable it made her brain shut off. “You don’t think I’m cool?”

And she was stuck. She wanted to punch the look off his face, but Eiko squealed in delight across the table. “Oh my *god* I am so excited! I will totally send you a message when I talk to my Tsukasa after work today! You’re gonna love him, Mako! He is so sweet and handsome and *cool* . Maybe your boyfriend here will learn something from him!”

Makoto was going to fire back with something in Ren’s defense when something hit her.

The name.

Tsukasa.

She had heard it before. When she was out with her dad the first time. The guy he had pinned to the wall (and whose girlfriend or whoever slapped her across the face) had mentioned a Tsukasa. Her dad said he was probably bad news.

She was excited, and it was hard to keep herself composed until Eiko walked out of the room after a promise of a picture and a double date.

“This is great news, Ren!” Makoto turned in her seat to face him, but most of her eagerness died when she saw the smile splitting his face in two. “W-What?”

He didn’t hold back on his laughter. “That was by far the cutest conversation I have ever had the privilege of being involved in.” She watched him laugh, even as she felt her face darken with every passing minute. She was embarrassed for sure, but listening to

Ren's laughter made her feel oddly at peace.

Regardless, she smacked him on the shoulder. "Stop that. I have to get home and tell my dad the good news!"

But before she could gather her things, Ren grabbed her wrist. "So. Does this mean I'm not *cool* enough and you're not going to take me with you as your *boyfriend?"*

She knew her answer, but she had a hell of a time trying to get it out of her mouth. "Um…n-no! O-Of course…of course not! I…I think you're…c-cool, I guess…? A-And if you want to…y-you can come… with me…"

He wrapped his arms around her shoulders the next second. "You are seriously too cute for words."

Whether that was insulting or not, she chose not to find out.

Ren, naturally, wanted to take her home, and she couldn't refuse him. He poked fun at her most of the way back because of her obsession with a stuffed toy, but at least he told her it was also extremely cute and precious. He even wanted to see the picture she sent Eiko, and Makoto was half tempted to tell him he couldn't make fun of her and then demand to see it.

But, he showed her the puppy dog eyes, and she caved.

"How did you stumble across this, if I can ask?"

Makoto sure as hell hadn't expected Ren to take her interest with any seriousness, but when she looked back over at him, he seemed genuinely curious. She just hoped he didn't laugh too much at her story.

"W-Well…I um, I was pretty young. I was a bit of a troublemaker, so one day, my mom tied me down to a chair and told me I was only allowed to watch whatever came on TV. I remember it having a catchy theme song, but I…I um, made the assumption that Buchimaru was a panda bear. When my dad would read me books at night, any time I saw a panda, I called it Buchi. Mostly anything that was black and white in the house I called Buchi. But of course,

my mom had to correct me, and I remember being heartbroken over not having anything Buchimaru related."

She chanced a look to Ren, but his smile was much warmer than it had been in the student council room. She turned away before he caught the blush rising to her cheeks. "W-Well, my dad liked to spoil me, so he came home with a Buchimaru pillow for me. I took it everywhere. Then I tore a seam, so he bought me a blanket. When I started to read on my own, he bought me some books. Oddly enough, I don't remember much about the actual show, but I just think it's cute and it always brings a smile to my face."

Ren took a step closer to her, literally until they were shoulder to shoulder, then held her hand in his. "Those are wonderful memories to cherish. Especially you being tied down to a chair!"

She pulled her hand away from his when he started to laugh. "I clearly learned from my mistake. Maybe I should tie *you* down to a chair until you learn to stop laughing at me."

His laughter came to a stop, but then that damn grin spread across his face. "You'd like to tie *me* down to a chair?"

She didn't even know how to respond to his tone, his words, that *smug* grin…

Thankfully, he dropped an arm over her shoulder and pulled her along to her apartment. "So. Are you going to ditch me for this wonderful new guy we are going to meet or am I going to be able to sleep well tonight?"

Now she was confused. "Why would I do that?"

"Because," he said with a light laugh. "This guy sounds really… *cool."*

Makoto tried not to let him see her rolling her eyes. "Please, Ren. One, that's possibly Eiko's boyfriend, so he's taken. Two, I think you're plenty cool. Three, he's likely a bad guy, which is why I even agreed to have this date in the first place."

"Ah. You really do think I'm cool."

She elbowed him in the ribs. “Sometimes. Except when you annoy me.”

She felt him chuckle. “I don’t know which version of you I like better. The flustered and cute one or the one that can throw me over her shoulder and sass me.”

They both came to a stop at the corner, but she took that second to look up at him. “Which…which one *do* you like…better?”

His eyes lost some of his earlier light, but his smile at least made her warm. “I like them all, because it’s all so perfectly *you* .” He then lifted her chin when she tried to look away. “Don’t ever change, Makoto. You’re wonderful the way you are.”

Even with the cooler days, she was *still* burning beside him.

“D-Do you think…we could, um, plan this…soon?”

As soon as the words left her lips, she regretted them. It was extremely selfish. They were *so close* to saving Haru. Mishima had given them two new cases to look into. Ren had to help so many other people besides *her* , but yet, she wanted him to go with her. And they needed to go soon, because she knew for a fact it would bring her dad back and he would fight again…

“I…I’m sorry,” she mumbled as she stepped out of his arm. “That was incredibly selfish of me to ask. We can do this once Haru is safe.”

Ren was quiet, almost to the point she turned and walked the rest of the way home without him. As soon as she started to walk off, his hand landed on her shoulder. “Why do you think that’s selfish?”

She tried to keep her main reason to herself. “Well, because Haru needs us to see this through.”

“Yeah, I know that.” He didn’t release her. “And we will. But no matter what, we still have a few days. There’s nothing we can really do but plan our time to be done by then. So there’s plenty of time to-,”

“But Mishima said we have more people to help.”

“And we will help them in time.”

He just had to have a comeback for everything.

“Makoto.” She hadn’t realized she was frowning until he said her name. “Your problems are just as important as everyone else’s. So tell me a day that works for you this week and we can go.”

He also made everything seem so *easy* . “You mean that?”

He smiled at her as he wrapped an arm around her. “I mean that. Because I’m *cool* .”

And there was his playfulness. She smacked him on the chest, but he only wrapped his other arm around her when she tried to pull away. She was going to go as far as stepping on his foot, but that seemed a little extreme. He wasn’t a criminal that was trying to haul her off somewhere. It was just Ren being Ren…

“I also seriously want that picture of your collection,” he whispered into her ear, which startled her and she was able to push him away. It didn’t make him lose the smile. “Especially if you wore something like a hat or a shirt. I think I would die from cuteness overload.”

She really wanted to smack him again. “M-Maybe I won’t send it to you!”

He reeled back in mock surprise. “You would be so mean as to deny me the most adorable thing in the world? That’s just cruel!”

Makoto turned on her heel before he got to see another blush rise to her face.

“Dream of me!”

But she stopped a second later, then turned back around. Ren hadn’t expected her to stop, and his eyes widened when she looked over at him. She nodded her head, then tried to wish him a goodnight without sounding like an idiot. “Um…have…have a good dream…n-night…too…”

A smile split his face in half and this time, she didn't turn back around when she headed for her building.

She may have been absorbed in her conversation with Ren (and his damn *smile)* and slammed the door shut when she stepped into her apartment. She sighed quickly, her ears still burning, then realized where she was.

"Makoto?"

Great. She probably scared the hell out of her mom, and her dad if he was around. So she tried to calm herself to avoid her *mother* hounding her about Ren…

Oh no…

Makoto had yet to tell them.

Suddenly, her mind was a jumbled mess and Ren was not the cause. Kind of. She made the excuse a while ago that things kept popping up, and that the last thing she was worried about was telling her parents about Ren. Her dad was hurting. Her mom's focus was on getting him fixed up. And after a month, it faded to the back of her mind.

What would they say to her now? Her mom would be overjoyed, she was sure, but her dad didn't need the news of her dating Ren for a *month* in the condition he was in. Maybe if it was just her mom, she could tell her. And have her promise not to tell her dad…

But then…she would be *lying* to her father, and that would break his heart more than if she just came out and said something now.

"Are you okay?"

Well, she wouldn't tell them today. She had other things to think about and one more night wouldn't hurt…right? "Oh. Yes. I'm fine. I'm…sorry…"

Her mother gave her a worried look, but she didn't question her

again. Makoto walked into the living room, but a part of her was sad that her dad wasn't in the room, too. Curious, she looked back over to her mom. "Where's Dad?"

"Resting." Makoto figured that was a good thing, but her mom didn't *look* happy at all. In fact, she looked really sad.

"Um. I-Is Dad…o-okay?"

Her mother's hesitation was enough of a nerve wracking moment that Makoto was forced to sit down on a couch before she fell to the ground. Did something else happen to him? She thought everything was going to be okay after she spoke to him the morning before. Was it Sae? Did she come to rub his possible retirement in his face? Or maybe his bosses, or people who hated him…?

"You don't need to worry, Makoto."

It was *far* too late for her to say that. "I thought he was okay…"

A sad smile pulled at her mom's lips. "He's hurting, but we went to the doctor this morning, and he was told he has to have surgery or he'll keep struggling to walk."

Makoto felt herself sink into the couch. It wasn't bad news, but it wasn't *good* news either. "Is he…is he going to be okay?"

"Well. I'm hoping that his ability to walk will help him perk back up, but he hasn't scheduled an appointment yet. But if he doesn't go through with it, or go back to work if he does, you *have* to understand and you can *not* hold it against him. Alright?"

Her hands folded together on her lap and her eyes fell to where they rested. Would she hate her dad if he chose to *give up?* No. However, she worried he would hate *himself* and then she would watch him suffer until he *died* .

She felt something land on her hands, and when she turned, her mother had come to sit beside her. "I know what you're thinking, but he's at least making an effort to think it through. He's been through so much, Makoto. We need to respect whatever he chooses to do or we're going to lose him completely."

Well, she wouldn't have that, that's for sure. "Do you think he will still help me…e-even if he doesn't go back to work?"

Now helping Eiko would be put on hold for a week, unless she was able to get approval from her dad to go ahead without him. But as much as she wanted Ren to be there on the *date* , she wanted her dad there, too. She didn't want to do it alone. Not that she wanted him to think she needed his constant help, but he was her sensei, in some regards. It was *their* case…

But he was hurt, and if having a surgery helped him with something as simple as *walking* , she would wait a lifetime.

Her mom's hand tightened over both of hers. "I think he would love to help you still, honey. So maybe in the morning, or tomorrow when you get home, you can talk to him about it and see how he takes it."

She would do just that.

Chapter 112

Chapter 112

Akihiko very rarely enjoyed laying in bed all day, but he was coming around.

He didn't like to think about the fact Minako had to work a little bit harder to bring him food or help him around, but she told him that she would do anything for him. She wore an honest smile most of the time, so it was hard to tell her it was okay and she shouldn't feel forced into taking care of him. He was bored out of his mind most of the time, and when she noticed him struggling to take a nap, she would sit next to him and tell him random stories while brushing her hands through his hair.

It was kind of nice to feel like this. Why would he even consider going through with a surgery? How much longer would he last *after* he was better before someone arrested him again and injured him *worse?*

"S-So…I, um…I spoke to that girl…a f-few days ago…"

One day, he was going to snap at Makoto for being so timid around him. "You did, huh?"

Minako had gone out to grab some dinner, ordering Makoto to make sure he didn't leave from his spot on the couch. Akihiko anticipated Makoto wanting to talk to him from the way she held herself, but she didn't actually say anything until Minako had walked out the door. He didn't know why, since Minako had known about their adventures in Kabukicho, but he still didn't want her to feel uncomfortable.

Makoto slowly nodded her head once. "Y-Yes. It went very differently from how I anticipated it going…"

A light blush came to her face. It made him curious. "How so?"

"She…um," she stumbled, turning her head to hide her face from

him. “She likes Buchi, too.”

He had to wait a minute for her words to sink into his mind. Then he broke out into a laugh. “She does, does she? Looks like you’re making friends with a victim.”

“I *tried* to talk to her about the issue first!” Her blush was now due to her frustration at his laughter. “But she wouldn’t listen. So I thought that if I told her off, she would close up and I wouldn’t *help* her.”

“I don’t mean that as a *bad* thing,” he told her as she crossed her arms defiantly. “Friends tend to share valuable information. So I’m happy for you.”

The anger was gone from her face. “R-Really?”

He leaned back against the couch and straightened his leg. “Yeah. You just have to be careful now. Friends will talk with you, but it’s going to be up to you to put the hammer down if need be. And telling your friends they’re wrong or in trouble is never something that’s easy to do.”

“Why wouldn’t it be easy?” Makoto eyed him curiously. “If she’s in trouble, it’s my job to help.”

Akihiko took a moment to collect his thoughts, then exhaled deeply. “What are you going to tell her if she swears she’s fine? That she’s not in trouble, you’re overthinking, until you actually believe her? Then what are you going to do when she goes missing, and shows up weeks later, and you were right all along?”

She continued to look at him like he had asked her the dumbest question, and maybe in a sense, it was a ridiculous question. But what Makoto had yet to learn was that people, especially teenagers, did *not* like to be told they were *wrong* . He assumed she had some practice with the kids at her school. He didn’t want to think about it, but she had tried to some degree to help the volleyball team with Kamoshida, but when she didn’t get answers, she went to the source, and *that* blew up in her face. It was one of the reasons he was scared to think about her being a cop. She had always been impatient, even as a child, and sometimes, it took him weeks or

months to get answers.

“What I’m trying to tell you is that most people your age don’t appreciate being told they’re wrong. And I know you, Makoto. While you can easily come out and tell her that she needs to stay away from Kabukicho, what if she retaliates and threatens your newfound friendship?”

Some sense of understanding flashed across her face. “Oh.” She seemed to be thinking over his words, but after a few minutes, she lowered her head. “Does that happen to you a lot?”

If she wanted to learn, he couldn’t hide the truth from her. It wouldn’t be fair. “I don’t really care much for friendship, but yeah, teenagers are hard to deal with. I would rather deal with you in your toddler phase than deal with one random teenager on the street. And you *know* you were the worst when you were that age.”

Makoto huffed and rolled her eyes. “I got better…”

Mostly thanks to her mother, but… “They feel like they’re entitled. They’re invincible. They deserve respect and all adults are out to get them. But what most people don’t understand is that they just want attention. How they turn out usually depends on who hears them first. Sometimes it’s someone at school. Sometimes it’s someone in a club they shouldn’t be at in the first place. Sometimes it’s over beef bowl and going to the gym. But it’s hard to pull them away once someone else has already caught their attention and they aren’t in immediate danger. Smart criminals know how to play their arrogance to their advantage.”

Makoto sighed, her hands twisting together on her lap. “She asked me to meet him. So…she wants to plan a double date sometime.”

Akihiko was impressed with her work. Especially if this student had an obsession that matched hers. He figured that was all Makoto would want to talk about. “A double date?”

She nodded. “Yes. His name is Tsukasa, the guy you told me was dangerous, and I think he was with her the last time we were out.” She stopped fiddling with her hands and lifted her eyes to meet his.

“But I want to do this with you. I want to help her as soon as I can, but I don’t want you to push yourself.”

He tried not to come across disappointed. “I am *not* going to pretend to be your boyfriend for this date.”

When Makoto went back to playing with her hands, he almost groaned into his hand, but then she spoke up timidly and said, “I um…I’ve asked…R-Ren to do that…”

Well. He was glad Makoto didn’t expect him to fill the role, but *Amamiya?* Wasn’t there anyone else in the school that would be better suited for it? “You’re serious?”

She flinched at his words, and he felt bad. Amamiya was a good kid, but he was *not* ready to imagine the two of them together. Minako would weep for days, but he wasn’t ready…

“I-Is that…n-not okay?”

But he wanted Makoto to handle this. He wanted her to make the decisions and he would only be there if things went south. If Makoto trusted Amamiya to be there with her and help her, then fine. “No, that’s fine. I guess. But I’m going to be there. So don’t you dare think about going without me, alright?”

She gave him a smile that seemed to remedy all of his pain at once. “I won’t, Dad. After all, you’re my sensei! And I’ll feel so much better knowing you’re there.”

Akihiko heard the door opening, so he shot a quick look to Makoto. “I mean it. I’ll fire you.”

“I’m home!”

Makoto nodded with another bright smile as she pushed herself off the couch. “I promise.”

But as he tried to make his dinner last as long as he could, the silence started to get to him. In a rare move, he tried to lighten the mood. “Makoto said she’s going on a date with Ren soon.”

Makoto literally dropped her chopsticks and Minako turned to her fast enough that her food fell from between her own. “What?!”

Sadly for him, Makoto didn’t say anything in response. There was a light dusting on her face, but that was it. If anything, she looked more upset that he had said something first.

Minako, however, wasn’t willing to let it slide. “When did you two start dating?”

“She said they were going *on* a date! Not that they were *dating!”*

Minako waved a hand at him, waving off his comment. “Oh don’t listen to him, Makoto. Where are you guys going?”

To his complete surprise, Makoto pushed her chair back from the table and stood up, the sad look never leaving her eyes. “Um. H-Have a good night…”

He tried to do the same to stop her, but was rudely reminded that he couldn’t move as fast. Thankfully, Minako was able to reach out to her before Makoto could get down the hall. “Wait, Makoto. Come back and finish your dinner.”

She stopped, but she didn’t turn around. “You guys are going to hate me.”

Akihiko spared Minako a glance, but then he chuckled. “Makoto. We’re not going to hate you.”

“Yes you will.”

“Makoto,” Minako said with a soft tone. “Nothing you say is going to make us hate you. And if this is about Ren, then I suggest you tell us before I assume he hurt you and you *know* how your dad is going to take that.”

Did Amamiya hurt her? But then why would she have asked him to go with her on the future double date… *mission?* Makoto at least was quick to come to the boy’s defense. “He didn’t hurt me! We’re already dat-…u-um…”

Everything suddenly clicked in his head. Amamiya joking about calling him *dad* one day. Makoto already having Amamiya with her on their date…All the times Amamiya talked about wanting to take care of her and keep her safe…The way he *spoke* about her…

Minako clapped her hands and smiled brightly. “I *knew* it! I knew this was going to happen! I am so happy for you Makoto!”

He wished he could be as happy, too. “When did this happen?”

Makoto’s face fell. “Y-You’re mad at me…”

He wasn’t *mad* . He wouldn’t even say he was surprised. He didn’t really know how he was feeling.

“He’s not mad, honey.” Minako reached over and tugged on his hand. “I’m sure he just needs some time to comprehend the news.”

That’s what it was. He just needed time. Time to realize Makoto was officially grown up and she would no longer want to spend time with him and some other guy was going to steal her away and it would just *have* to be Amamiya…

“I meant what I told you before, Dad.” Makoto spoke with a more clear voice than she had when she stumbled over telling them (kind of) that she was in a relationship with *Amamiya* … “You’ll always be my favorite guy.”

While the admission made him feel a little better, it was still difficult for him to believe. However, he had thought the two of them had been together months ago, but she denied it. Regardless, he should have been happy for her, since she seemed happy. Her mother was happy…

Minako oddly didn’t push Makoto for any more details and before long, Minako was helping him along to bed. It was pretty early for her to think he was going to actually sleep, but the minute the door was shut, the room began to suffocate him.

“You should be happy for her, Aki.”

He also really didn't want to start an argument with her. "I'm not mad…"

"And why aren't you happy?"

He figured he should be more open with her, like she wanted, but he was also afraid his thought would upset her and backfire in his face. "I am happy for her. Amamiya is a good kid. But…maybe I'm just selfish and I don't want to lose my last daughter to another guy."

There was an odd silence, but then a light chuckle filled the room. "You're jealous?"

"N-No…" He watched as Minako walked around the bed to sit next to him. She chuckled at him again, then he sighed. "I've just lost one daughter. I don't want to lose the other. I'm paranoid, I know, but I'm not going to stop worrying about her."

For several minutes, he thought Minako was going to snap at him and tell him Makoto wasn't Sae and he wasn't going to lose her. Instead, she leaned back against the wall and turned to him with a soft smile. "I know you're overprotective, but I think it's an okay thing. However, I hope you understand that if Ren does do anything to hurt her, *I'm* going to be the one to get to him first."

He didn't think he heard her right. "What?"

Her smile widened as she leaned over to rest against him. "But I like him. He cares a lot about people, and I think he's going to help Makoto out a lot. And he's not going to do anything to purposely hurt her because he knows she can come home in tears and both of us will murder him."

It was nice to know Minako wasn't gushing about how wonderful Amamiya was, or screaming at him for being scared. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and released a breath he hadn't realized he had been holding. "Thank you."

The weekend that followed was brutal.

Yukari stopped by to check on them, which of course led to recounting many embarrassing memories (in front of his *daughter!)*

and earning laughs from both her and Minako. He was relieved that Mitsuru didn't *hate* him or attack him when she came over, but she still issued a stern reminder of what would happen the next time he didn't listen to her.

She also produced a folder of paperwork that he cringed seeing. "I will only give this to you if you promise to work from home and not try and investigate on your own."

Minako gave him a hard look, so he nodded his head and reached out to grab the file. He clearly had no intention of doing anything at the moment. He was *trying* to stay off his leg, which made him *sit* , which made him *go crazy* . Mitsuru giving his mind something to do was a blessing, but it also brought him back to the question he was avoiding like the plague.

Are you really going to be able to give up?

However, it was Makoto that seemed to realize he was feeling trapped and she came to his rescue. "Um, so…I know it's been a long weekend for you, and I don't want you to feel obligated to say yes, but…um…"

"Makoto." It took her a second or two to look up at him. "Ask me your question."

She didn't stutter or hesitate. "Will you be able to come with us tonight on our…double date?" Then she started to ramble on. "I know you're hurt, but I think you want to get out and do something again. And Eiko told me today was a good day and Ren said he's not doing anything, b-but we can wait, too…"

In his silence, Minako came around the corner. "I don't think that's a good idea, honey. Your dad needs to *rest* ."

Truth be told, he was going insane. He had *nothing* to do. And when he had nothing to do, his thoughts became depressing and hurtful. The longer he sat with the mindset that he royally fucked up and he deserved this, the more he was going to upset the two of them. Plus, it wasn't like he was going to be chasing after a bad guy. Just having an awkward dinner…

So… “What? I can’t take my wife out to dinner whenever I want?”

The look on Minako’s face brought a smile to his. Makoto’s reaction was just as entertaining. “R-Really?”

Once Minako overcame her shock, he saw her come sit down in the room with them. “I still don’t think this is a good idea…”

“Please, Mom.” Makoto was standing in front of her a second later. “Dad needs to get out. Get some fresh air. And we’re just going to have dinner. He will be sitting anyway.”

Minako looked to her daughter, then to him. Finally, after what felt like *years* , she sighed. “Fine.” She then pointed a finger at him. “But only dinner. No extra sightseeing or shopping until you’re cleared by the doctor. Understood?”

He chuckled, since he knew *she* was the one who likely wanted to go shopping and sightseeing. But he kept that to himself. “Yeah, just dinner.”

Minako’s red eyes remained on him for several seconds, then she turned to Makoto. “I guess I get to officially meet your *boyfriend.”*

Eager to change the subject, Akihiko asked, “What’s your plan for the date then?”

He felt Minako’s eyes on him again, but he tried to pretend that he hadn’t interrupted her fan-girl moment. Makoto was quick to answer him. “Well. I-I don’t know yet. I wanted to make sure it was okay with you before I set anything in motion.”

“So,” he started, trying to get more comfortable on the couch. “What’s your plan for the date?”

A small smile and a light blush came to her face. “O-Oh. W-Well…I guess Ren and I will meet them somewhere…hopefully close to home so you don’t have to walk too far. T-Then you and mom can act like normal customers and you can watch from a distance. I’ll be sure to tell you what happens. I have a list of questions and conversation scenarios mapped out if you want to look at them!”

Minako sighed. “Then why do we need to be there?”

A frown replaced Makoto’s smile, but as soon as she shook her head, it was back. “Because this is a case I’m working with Dad. While I don’t think anything will go wrong over dinner, a rookie can’t officially be by themselves. Right, Dad?”

Her excitement was contagious. “Right.”

It just didn’t seem to stretch to Minako. “Alright, alright. I guess I can suffer through dinner with your father while you enjoy your dinner with your *boyfriend* .” Minako rose to her feet while Akihiko and Makoto exchanged a look. “But one day, he’s going to come over *here* for dinner! And yes, I’m going to be the annoying mother who tells him all about your embarrassing childhood moments and your father is going to intimidate him with a look so prepare for that.”

Akihiko watched as she walked back down the hall and to their room. Makoto’s eyes were filled with a small amount of fear, but he tried to laugh it off. “She’s dramatic, but probably right. And if Amamiya is already terrified of me, he better back off now.”

“S-So…” Her voice was quiet, and a part of him felt bad for ruining her good mood. “So you don’t hate him?”

He had to choose his words carefully. “No, I don’t hate him.” But he sure as hell wasn’t going to admit right now that he was a *good* kid. “If he makes you happy, then…fine. I’m just worried that you’re going to stop talking to me. It’s selfish, I know, but you’re *my* daughter. And if he hurts you, he’ll regret it.”

When her smile brightened her face, he felt much better. “Thank you, Dad. But I’ll still talk to you. After all, you have to train me! No one else can do that but you.”

He nodded his head and returned her smile. “Then I suggest you get to setting up your little date, trainee.”

Makoto was quick to get to work on her phone. He would have tried to get up and go find out if Minako was pissed or just busy doing something, but he knew better than to try and move around without

a purpose. Minako allowing him to go out was good enough. But after a few minutes, Makoto lowered her phone to her side. She had an odd look on her face, like she was thinking about something *not good* , so maybe someone had denied going out today?

“Everything okay?”

Makoto blinked, then shook her head to try and play it off. “O-Oh…y-yes.”

It didn’t work. “Makoto.”

He gave her a few seconds. Then, “Can I ask you something a little different?”

“Um, okay?”

She wiped her hands on her legs before she spoke to him. “If you could use your powers to bring every bad guy to justice, would you? Or do you think it’s…cheating?”

He had *no* idea where that had come from. “What do you mean?”

Makoto fell back into her seat. “I mean, I just think about what would have happened had my friends not stopped Kamoshida. I’m not trying to say that you or those like you don’t do enough, but Kamoshida never would have been arrested by normal means. Madarame was famous. Kaneshiro was untouchable. So if you knew there was a criminal out there you couldn’t reach, would you do what we do to stop him?”

Was she referring to what he had asked her before? He would *love* to bring Shido down by whatever means necessary, but his point then had been more for her to focus on *her* . Arresting criminals was *his* job. Even if he had spent his entire life fighting, that didn’t mean he wanted it for his children.

“Your mom liked to tell me that I can’t save every single person in this city. You and your friends can’t save every single person in this city. If I knew how to do whatever you do, then yes. I probably would be going after those I can’t get my hands on. But I can also tell you this: being a cop doesn’t always mean arresting criminals. My

favorite part of the job is actually walking around and talking to people. Most of them don't need a change of heart as much as just someone to talk to, a conversation to steer them in a better direction. And you'd be surprised how many of those people go unnoticed because we spend most of our time chasing down people we will never catch."

Akihiko sat back and thought about what he had just said. He enjoyed dealing with youth like Ryuji, watching them turn their anger into something productive, just because he *listened* to them. That was all it took. One trip to beef bowl and a conversation about his likes. Something his father had denied him and his mother was too busy to offer him. Did Ryuji need a Phantom Thief to target him?

No.

Most of them wouldn't, until it was too late.

"And if you spend most of your time changing the hearts of those that you feel *need* it, you'll forget about why they were corrupt to begin with, and you'll never win."

When Makoto was silent for far too long, he tried to bring back her voice. "Why are you asking all of this?"

It took her a few seconds to realize he had asked her a question, but then she clamped her hands together. "W-Well, it's just that I see what we are doing, and it's good, but…I always feel like I want to stop. But with this recent one, his daughter is a friend at school, and she just said something to me that I've been thinking about for a while."

"Like what?"

She paused for a moment. "She told me that love isn't always bright and warm. That it hurts sometimes. But if it's true, you will fight." She lifted her head and met his eyes and he braced himself for what she was going to say. "And I want to fight for Sis. Because it will make you happy, and Mom happy, and I always think I could have done more in the past and now, it's too late."

He couldn't remember the last time they had spoken about Sae, but he saw the tears in Makoto's eyes and he was at a loss for words.

"She acts like she hates us, you especially, but then she tells us you're kidnapped and rushes off to help me when I'm cornered at school. She feels comfortable enough to talk to Mom about what upsets her. She *has* a palace, but yet, she's not a bad person…"

Truthfully, he had stopped listening when Makoto admitted that Sae had been the reason they knew he had been kidnapped. In retrospect, he should have guessed, because Sae probably didn't just waltz back to the police station where she wasn't all that appreciated and tell them since they wouldn't *care* . But that thought also made him hurt. She *cared* about him enough to know not to go to them and went to her family because she had nowhere else to go…

"W-We should probably get ready soon. R-Ren said he would meet me at the station in an hour."

Makoto stood up, head to her chest, but she was close enough to him that he was able to reach out and grab one of her arms without getting up. "Wait." He had to say something to her. He just didn't know *what* . "You shouldn't feel obligated to do anything more than love your sister. I can try and reason with her, but I know this is because of me and not you or your mother."

"And what do you do when reasoning doesn't work anymore?"

He didn't want to tell her that he usually just let the kid go and hope for the best, but he couldn't *lie* to her. "There's not much more you can do, honestly."

Makoto shook her head. "But *I* can do more."

He tugged on her hand before she could pull away. "Just…give her some time. I know I say that a lot, and your mother says it as well, but like you said, she's not a bad person. Maybe she needs a wakeup call, but in order for her to grow, she needs to find it herself."

“Would you go to her palace if she was just another criminal and not your daughter?”

This time, he didn’t have the strength to keep his hand on hers and Makoto walked off to her room. Would he appreciate a group of kids going into his daughter’s subconscious and straightening her out? Maybe. Not really. He still thought that Minako was right and she just needed more time. As of now, he hadn’t heard anything about Sae causing problems. She hadn’t stopped by to arrest him or scold him or anything like it. Maybe things had calmed down and Sae really just needed him to stop poking around in her life…

“Please tell me you don’t plan on wearing that to our date.”

Akihiko had no idea how he didn’t hear Minako sneak up on him, but she chuckled at his reaction. “W-Where did you come from?”

She stood behind him and placed her hands on his shoulder. “I came from heaven, honey.”

“Yeah, okay.” She pinched his shoulders, but he still had a smile on his face. “And I thought you were in charge of my wardrobe while I was injured.”

“Well,” she said as she placed her head next to his. “I don’t want you to look terrible. I’ll be offended if people see us together and you look like crap.”

He really hoped she was being playful and not serious. “Oh.”

“This I like.” She ran a hand over his chin and giggled in his ear. “Maybe you should just grow it out.”

Ever since Minako had made that one comment about him looking “extremely hot” with a little bit of growth on his face, he tried to make sure he didn’t shave all that often. But since he was on bedrest the last few days, he sure as hell didn’t think about it. While he was glad she enjoyed it, or it didn’t make him look *terrible* , it was a little *too* long for his tastes now.

“I’m not going to grow it out,” he told her. But, she planted a kiss on his cheek and walked back around the couch to stand in front of

him. She handed him his crutch, then offered her hand like she had done so many times in the past.

He wanted to ask her about her thoughts on Sae, but he wasn't going to kill her mood right now. She was smiling and happy and telling him that *she* would be the one to dress him *again* because her chances were running out. He let her take her time, let her pick out what they would *both* wear, and he just stood there in their room like he was seeing her in dress for the first time.

He had a moment to poke fun at her. "Pretty sure you're a little overdressed."

And she promptly smacked him in the chest. "I'm sorry that I want to look nice when I want to go out with you."

"You would be beautiful in anything you wore, Minako."

She stumbled over the last button on his shirt and a small blush colored her face. It made his chest swell with pride. It was a short-lived sight, but it was what he needed to see. Minako continued to finish "dolling" him up, then took a step back to examine her work.

"You've been so down for the past few weeks and I was terrified I would never see that look in your eyes again." A smile spread across her lips, her eyes glowed with light, and he was thankful for the support of his crutch or he would have fallen over.

"I mean it, Aki." She closed the distance between the two of them and rested her hands on his chest. "I know you need more time to think, but I know you're still in there. I can see it. And I'll do whatever I can to make sure I don't lose you."

He was the one who leaned in to kiss her first. He was beyond lucky to have her still in his life. Through the hell he had made for her and for her children, to every single moment she had to deal with him falling apart, she was there for him. Always showing him how much she loved him, how much his happiness meant to her, the lengths she would go to so he didn't drown in his misery.

"Now, try not to ruin Makoto's date," she whispered against his lips.

“You’ll have plenty of time to intimidate the hell out of Ren in the future, okay?”

He chuckled as she stepped away from him. “If he’s intimidated by me, he doesn’t deserve Makoto.”

“No he doesn’t, does he?”

They left several minutes after Makoto did. While Akihiko was desperate to know how the conversation would go (and how Amamiya treated his daughter), he wanted to enjoy his time out with Minako. He was grateful Makoto had chosen the café in Shibuya. It was quiet. People minded their business.

And it was small.

They were able to snag a table right behind where Makoto and Amamiya and their other “date” had been sitting. However, instead of sitting back to back with the criminal in question and his rather young girlfriend (or whoever), he sat on the other side of the booth to where he had a perfect view of Amamiya.

Makoto likely told the boy they would be there since it was *for a mission* , but Amamiya stilled in his seat when he met his eyes. He personally got a kick out of it, but he also knew he didn’t want to blow the cover Makoto had worked hard to plan out.

Plus, Minako realized what he was doing and moved to block his line of sight. “What did I tell you before we left?”

He mumbled under his breath, then Minako kicked at him under the table. “I’m not to intimidate him today.”

Knowing he was technically working, he was pretty silent during their time at the café. Minako didn’t seem to mind, or if she did, she didn’t tell him. But it was kind of nice, just sitting around with her, listening to her remarks about how she didn’t understand why he liked coffee so much and why he couldn’t like sweet things instead. He of course had to poke fun at her for ordering a piece of cake *with* dinner instead of waiting. Another kick to his shin was all the reply he got.

He really missed out on these kinds of events, didn’t he? Something

as simple as sitting across the table talking about random things brought a shine to her eyes that he loved so much. Not that sitting at home and doing the same thing didn't make her *happy* , but it was *different* .

But when Makoto's friend got up without the guy next to her following her, he tried to zone back in. He suddenly regretted not sitting where Minako was.

"You can come sit next to me."

He would never understand her ability to read him as well as she could. Minako laughed at him since he *knew* he was blushing for being caught, then he carefully pushed himself out of his seat, using the table as support, and plopped in beside her. He didn't know if it would be too much to put an arm around her shoulder, but he wanted to, and he knew she wouldn't mind.

And he was rewarded with a giggle into his chest once he did so. "You're so cute, Aki."

He was happy. Too happy. He forgot why he had moved in the first place. He figured that if Makoto really needed him, she would let him know.

Because in that moment, it was just him and the woman he loved. Nothing else.

Chapter 113

Chapter 113

From the moment she sat down at the café, her heart was pounding.

Makoto had her game plan all set and ready to go, but she would look like a fool if she pulled out her notes and started reading her questions from them. It made her appreciate her dad so much more since *he* never pocketed paper scripts but still knew exactly what to say.

Plus, she was soon sitting directly in front of a criminal, and her gut was telling her he was one of the worst. If Eiko thought he was the best thing ever, she needed a reality check. Makoto may not have known Ren all that well, and she couldn't really feel comfortable *bragging* about how wonderful he was, but the man in front of her was a creep. He had creepy eyes. A creepy smile. A creepy voice. He wore too much cologne. Everything was *perfect* to him.

Ren must have sensed her anxiety and reached for her hand under the table. He moved closer to her, but not enough to distract the love-struck couple in front of her.

And then her dad showed up. She suddenly regretted asking him to go at all. Her mom and dad looked nice, so that was nice to see at least, but when she felt Ren tense next to her, she panicked. She had told him they would be there (and he had told her he thought it was wonderful to have that relationship with her father), but she knew her dad and he had chosen to sit where he could *see* him and *that* was why Ren was worried.

She didn't need that on top of a million other problems that could go wrong in a blink of an eye.

So, she thought it was best to give herself a distraction and start her quest for the truth. "I understand you two met at a club?"

Tsukasa turned his bright smile to her. "Yes we did. I knew she was

the one when I first caught sight of her."

Eiko literally melted into him. "Ah, Tsukasa, you are too sweet!"

Makoto thought she was going to get sick. "That's a strange place to meet the love of your life, don't you think?"

Eiko glared at her for half a second, then rubbed her head into her "boyfriend's" chest. "She's just jealous, baby. Her boyfriend isn't as *cool* as you are!"

Ren is better than this piece of work! "I'm just intrigued, is all."

"It's alright, Princess." Tsukasa lost his smile and looked at her. His eyes were still glowing. She assumed he was up to something. "I understand you have some reservations about me, since I'm a club host. But you misunderstand. I'm just a man who's been stricken by love. And she's perfect, isn't she?"

Nothing sounded genuine to her. He was a smooth talker, she would give him that.

But he continued on. "You're a really sweet friend for caring about my princess like this, though." He turned to kiss Eiko on the top of her head. The girl squealed in delight. "You got a good friend here, babe."

Sadly for her, much of the conversation at dinner was Eiko fawning over Tsukasa and vice versa. Makoto had a hard time trying to even pretend she was hungry with the couple in front of her. She only snapped out of her thoughts when Ren bumped into her.

"So, if I want to be *cool* , I have to call you my princess?"

He was teasing, she could tell, but she slapped his arm anyway. "Don't."

His smile was much appreciated, and she was at least reminded that she wasn't alone. How Ren was able to finish his meal with the disgusting display of affection before them, she didn't want to know.

Was this how Ren wanted her to be, how he wanted *them* to be?

Her dad *would* murder him.

…Right. She was on a mission. “How old are you again, Tsukasa?”

It was probably a rude question, but the young man didn’t take offense in the slightest. “I’m 23 baby. But love don’t have an age. I promise I’ll take good care of my princess until the day I die!”

There was no way this was heartfelt and true love. *No way.*

“But I know some great friends who are just as cool as me that would treat you like an angel.” He chuckled. “Do you treat her like an angel, Glasses Boy?”

Glasses Boy?

If they were out walking around, Makoto may have punched him. But Ren grabbed her fist and squeezed her hand tightly. “Well. I’m still trying to be cool, but I do my best.”

He’s better than you!

But something drastic changed when Eiko left the table for a few minutes. Tsukasa leaned into his hand and gave her a terrifyingly brilliant smile. “You like what you see, babe?”

No. She didn’t. “Um, excuse me?”

She noticed Ren moved even closer to her. It didn’t bother the man in front of them. “Any friend of my princess is my friend. I’d love to get to know you more, beautiful. Pass me your digits and I’ll be more than happy to show you around town.”

Before she could outright deny him, Ren spoke up. “Yeah. Let’s be friends. Here, tell me your number and I’ll send you a quick text.”

Tsukasa glared over at him. “I was talking to the lady. I don’t want to be your friend.”

However, she thought of something. If she really wanted to catch him being shady and doing criminal things, she *had* to keep him under surveillance. Ren may not appreciate it, and her *father* would

be furious, but it was to help her friend.

“Sure. I don’t mind.”

The twisted smile that came to his face made her wish she had told him off. Thankfully, Eiko came back a moment later, gathered her things, and grabbed Tsukasa’s arm. “Let’s go baby! I don’t think Makoto enjoys being so jealous that her boyfriend isn’t you!”

How thoughtful.

But Tsukasa had to get one last shot in when he offered to pay for their tab. Ren tried to fight him, but the older man one upped him. “Spend your hard earned yen on your girl or someone else will.”

She grabbed Ren’s arm to reassure him it was alright, then the two of them walked out the door. Makoto released her breath in one, long exhale. “That was more difficult than I imagined it would be.”

“I think you did well.”

She tried her best to give him a smile. “Thank you. But I hope you know that I only allowed him to have my number so I can try something in the future.”

Ren’s eyes shined with curiosity. “Oh? So you’re not going to ditch me for him?”

“Stop that.” She quickly put her phone in her bag. “And for the record, you are much better than him.”

He draped an arm over her shoulder with a grin. “That’s really sweet of you to say. I may have been a little worried.”

Her hands covered her face. “You don’t *want* to act like that, do you?”

She felt him pull on one of her wrists and she had no choice but to look over at him. “I just want to see you happy. And I saw your face tonight. It was actually kind of cute in a way.”

Ren would never make sense. “I asked if *you* wanted…that.”

He pulled on her until she toppled over into him. “That was a bit much. I don’t need the world to know how much I adore you. Just me. Just you. That’s all.”

She was grateful that she was already buried in his chest so he didn’t see her blush. His chuckle proved he could *feel* it, but… whatever.

“So. How did it go?”

Makoto immediately pulled away from Ren to find her dad lowering himself down in the booth across from her. Her mom was shortly to follow after him, but Ren was tense next to her. Her dad was glaring at him. Her mom was beaming at him. Makoto figured she had to draw their attention if poor Ren wanted to *breathe.*

“U-Um…H-He’s…uh…creepy…”

Well done, Makoto…

To her surprise, her dad gave Ren one last look, then turned his eyes to her. “He’s creepy? How so?”

Did he not remember who she was talking with? Or was he maybe trying not to think about the boy next to her and he needed a distraction? “Well…”

“He asked for her number.”

She sure as hell hadn’t expected Ren to answer for her. Neither did her dad. “What?”

Now she had everyone’s eyes on her. It was also much warmer now. “W-Well…I have a thought…to use it against him. S-So…”

“You gave a man like that your phone number?”

Was her dad *mad?* Did she maybe think a little too much and mess up? “Y-Yes…”

“Why didn’t you stop her?”

“Aki, stop it.”

“I did try.” Makoto also regretted not sitting on the end of the booth so she could use this moment to run away. “But he seemed a little too interested in her and she has a plan. Let her do it.”

Her hands clenched at her side and she thought her father was going to lean across the table and strangle Ren. He did quite the opposite. “And what’s your plan, Makoto?”

He sounded so disappointed in her. It made her heart hurt.

“We need to pick up a few things at the store, so we should get going.”

And now her *mom* was mad and now they would start fighting all because she thought she had a situation out of her hands in perfect control.

“I’m sorry, Makoto.” She finally looked over the table to her dad, and he looked tired again. “It’s just that…he’s a *criminal* . What if he goes after you?”

“I’ll keep her safe.” Ren reached for her hand under the table, but his voice…he sounded so *confident* . In front of her *dad!* “You’ve trusted me with this before, and I know that a guy like that is probably out of my league. So I’ll make sure Makoto says something to you before she goes off on her own. I promise.”

She felt like she was going to break Ren’s hand in the silence that followed. Her eyes jumped around, from the table, to Ren’s arm, to her parents across the table. Her mom at least had a smile. Her dad just looked defeated. She had to reassure him that she would still talk to him…when she had everything sorted out in her mind.

“Fine.” She released a breath she didn’t realize she was holding. “But if he contacts you, I want to know. And I want to know what you plan on doing, alright?”

All she could do was nod her head. A few minutes later, both her

parents wished them a good night (her dad a little more *stern)* , then it was just her and Ren. Makoto felt like the entire world was lifted off her shoulders, her chest, and she was ready to fall asleep.

“So. Are you excited for our trip to DestinyLand?”

She chose to lean against Ren for the time being, trying to let everything flow out of her system in her breaths. He was patient with her at least, but then she figured he would like an answer. “I’ve never been before.”

He laughed. “I haven’t been either. It will be an adventure for both of us then.”

They had just finished Okumura’s palace the night before. Now they just had to wait a few more days for the confession. Haru was happy and excited, then had told them all about her father scheduling a trip to the amusement park on the edge of town and how it would be so nice to go as a team. To celebrate freedom. Another life changed; another heart cured.

She didn’t know how to tell Ren she may have been afraid of heights. “Everyone else will be going.”

“Yeah, I know.” He carefully turned so he could still be holding her hand and get out of the booth at the same time. “It will be a lot of fun. We all deserve it.” He helped her out, then lifted his free hand to the side of her face. He was standing really close to her. “You deserve a break.”

His smile warmed her face and his hand fell to his side. He pulled her along and escorted her home, even if a part of her wanted to tell him that she would stick around and wait for her parents and he could head home on his own.

“Nope. Not gonna happen. I promised your dad that I would keep you safe and I promised your sister I would take you home. I am *not* about to get murdered this young.”

She figured there was no harm in allowing him to take her the rest of the way home.

But come morning, she felt something cold land in her stomach.

There were several unread texts from an unknown number overnight. It took her a solid five minutes to get to the first one to see who it was from, and she cringed realizing they were all from Tsukasa. Why in the world was he sending her texts all through the night? As she read over some of them, she started to get sick.

If Eiko saw this or *knew* about it, she would be furious.

If Ren saw them, *he* would be furious.

If her *father* saw them…the man would be dead.

Makoto chalked it up to a desperate plea of attention over one night, but they didn't *stop* . Her phone went off twice every hour at school. She was pretty sure she annoyed Ren on their way to her place because she walked in silence, trying to think about why Tsukasa was even messaging her at all.

But before they parted ways, Ren reached out for her hand. "This might sound really cheesy, but I'm really excited to ride at least *one* ride with you tomorrow. I bet you'll be super cute on a roller coaster."

Right… Well, he would probably be amused for sure. Or missing a hand at the end of the evening.

The texts didn't stop that night either, but her dad had taken medication for his knee and had passed out before she could tell him. She sure as hell wasn't about to tell her mother and have her tell her dad and then Makoto later would find out he had been arrested for *murder* because she couldn't stop him.

Makoto told herself to keep herself in check, she would turn her phone off until the end of the day.

It was another long day at school, but everyone's cheeriness at the end of the day made her feel so much better. Haru was the first one to meet her, given they were in the same class, and the bright smile on her face made her smile in return.

"I really do appreciate you doing this for us, Haru," Makoto said with

a light bow of her head. Haru only giggled into her hand and stepped up by her side.

“There’s no need to be so formal, Mako-chan. I’m happy to spend my time with all my friends!”

At least Haru was happy now that her father was on his way to becoming the man she had remembered him as.

However, standing in the front of the park and all the bright lights and warm colors made Makoto think that she could actually enjoy this trip after all. The atmosphere was energizing, even if there was no one there but the staff and her friends. They were all friendly as they waved at Haru, welcomed their group into the park, and all Makoto could do was stand around and look around her.

It was like a fairy tale that she never really enjoyed as a child. But she could see the appeal now. She did, however, almost scream when she felt something on her hand.

“You are really beautiful right now, you know?”

One day. Just *one* day, she wanted to be able to say something as endearing back to him before she heated up too much and imploded. At least Ren found her reaction funny, or maybe he was trying to hide how upset he was that she didn’t say anything back to him…

Just as quickly as she felt his hand on hers, it was gone, and there was an odd laugh in front of them. “I knew it.”

Futaba .

She *would* be the one to try and snoop around to find out a dark secret no one else knew. “Yeah, fine. You caught me. Now go get lost and I’ll buy you a souvenir to take home to Sojiro.”

“Two.”

Makoto could feel Ren rolling his eyes. “Fine.”

The younger girl smiled happily as she turned and walked to where

the rest of the group had wandered off. Makoto figured it would be rude to lag too far behind, but once again, she felt Ren place his hand on hers.

“Does it bother you, that no one else knows?”

She hadn’t been expecting him to ask her that. He said it so *sadly* , like he wanted to, but he was holding back for her… “D-Do you want to tell them?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know. I just…I want to enjoy this day with you. And maybe they already know and haven’t said anything. I get that we’re all here as friends, but when in the world am I going to be able to come back here and see that look on your face when we walked in?”

Was he trying to tell her that they hadn’t gone out enough to really consider themselves *dating?* He listened to her problems. When did she listen to his? When did she try and go out of her way to make *him* happy that wasn’t a pitiful blush after he told her she was beautiful?

“I…I think we can come back…if…if you want?”

A small smile spread over his face. “We can. And we will. Because it would probably be rude to hog you all to myself today, huh?”

His hand fell from hers and her heart fell into her stomach. He walked ahead of her and she remained frozen in her place. She was failing to be a good girlfriend. She had no idea how to be a good one, but she wouldn’t even really consider herself a good *friend* right now.

She could ride one ride with him, she thought. It wouldn’t be *enough* , but it could be a start. Hopefully.

But at the same time, it was nice to be with her friends.

Ryuji and Ann liked to see how many times they could ride a giant spinning ride before they got sick and didn’t get back on.

Yusuke and Futaba seemed more interested in the food and the

appeal of the castles, and annoying each other.

Haru just seemed peaceful wherever they went, but she always wore a smile and reminded them all to “have as much fun as their heart could handle.”

Morgana was even lively, eager to see the park in Futaba’s arms or on Ren’s shoulders. *He* was the one that spotted the giant mass of steel with loops and terrifying heights and tried to guess who would cry first on the ride.

She had no choice, since everyone else was going to get on it.

And she was pretty sure she gave Morgana all the evidence that she was, in fact, the one who was scared the most after they got off.

Ren thoroughly enjoyed it, even if he complained about his hand being broken. His laughter as he walked next to her after the ride was over made her burn more with every step. And *of course* there was a picture involved to capture the humiliating moment that he was *dying* to purchase.

Ryuji couldn’t stop laughing either. “Damn, Prez! You sure don’t like roller coasters, do ya?!”

Ann was nice enough to come to her defense. “Not everyone likes to be dropped from hundreds of kilometers in the sky and thrown around like a rag doll!”

Her only source of comfort was the fact that Ren still liked her enough to ride next to her *and* buy her a copy of the picture, too. “I want you to remember our first ride together, even if you really didn’t enjoy it.”

She would hide it, because if her mother found it…

“Hey *Mom* . Can I get some money for a snack?”

Makoto blinked and Futaba was right in her face. “H-Huh?” Did she seriously just ask her for money…and call her *Mom?*

“Yeah, *Mom!* ”

She could understand Futaba, but certainly not *Haru.* “I…I’m not your mom.”

“Yeah, yeah, c’mon *Mom!”*

What the hell was happening? Did Ren tell all of them to come up to her and call her *mom?* Why?!

But Futaba had the killing line. “But who else can handle Dad but you?!”

Makoto was beyond grateful that the lights were already pink and purple or she would have given them all another reason to laugh at her. Her eyes met with Ren’s, and he had a small grin plastered to his face. It was hard to read his eyes behind the glare of his glasses, but she noticed his chest shaking ever so lightly. She didn’t know whether to be embarrassed by it or upset by it.

“Are you and Ren *dating?”*

Ann gaped at her before she even managed to look over at her. At least her eyes sparkled in delight and not disgust. But the longer Makoto stood there under the eyes of her friends, the more apprehensive she became. Ren didn’t come out and *tell* her it was okay, and she would rather have that verbal confirmation before she did…

“The dinner is all set up and ready for us now!”

Gods she could have *hugged* Haru for pulling everyone’s attention off of her. She gave Makoto a knowing smile, then turned and led the way to where they were supposed to have their planned dinner. (Makoto had thought it was a bit excessive, but Haru quickly put an end to that before Makoto could finish her sentence.)

And when Ren had to walk past her, he stopped. “Futaba has been calling you *mom* behind your back for a long time.” He laughed softly, but never looked over at her. “I think it’s fitting, if I’m being honest.”

He walked on after the rest of them without waiting for a reply. Not that she would be able to say anything after he said *that* , but she

was getting irritated with herself for never having the ability to say *something* . For now, she figured it would be for the best to try and enjoy the evening and maybe have a heart to heart with Ren later.

They were all sitting down to the surprisingly pleasant spread of food the staff had provided them. Futaba sat next to her and Makoto could feel her stares every so often and it made her extremely uncomfortable. Ren at least was courteous enough to sit across the table to avoid any more awkward conversation topics about *them* . For the time being, Ryuji was keeping him occupied.

But Futaba wasn't the only person giving her sly grins or starry eyed looks. Ann beamed at her whenever she finished a sentence. Haru smiled happily when she lifted her teacup to take a sip.

She was suddenly very thankful for Yusuke and his lack of interest.

Would it be wrong of her to just come out and tell everyone the truth? They already seemed to *know* , and the last thing she wanted to do was bury herself under another *lie* .

"Oh man! The press conference starts in a few minutes!" Ryuji literally shouted with a mouthful of food, but it got the eyes off of her for the time being. As much as Makoto really didn't want to watch it, already knowing what would happen, she also didn't want to ruin Haru's mood. It was her *dad* , not just some terrible criminal who wanted to blackmail them or throw them in jail. He could have been a little more sensitive.

The next second, however, mostly everyone had their phone in their hands. She figured it would be rude to be the only one not paying attention. She didn't expect it to be any different than Madarame's confession, and they were all supposed to be having *fun* . But it was Haru's first time seeing a confession, and given it was her father, they needed to see it.

Everything seemed normal. Okumura was sitting behind a set of microphones, a defeated and remorseful look on his face. He began his confession, telling the world of his horrors, the terrible conditions he *knew* he was forcing his workers to be in, how he only wanted money and recognition and nothing else mattered.

But he didn’t stop with *his* corruption.

Makoto’s heart picked up its pace when he looked right into the camera and added that he *knew* who was behind the mental shutdowns. It was what they were hoping for. They would finally *know* who was behind everything and the *world* would know as well.

But every fairy tale that her mom tried to tell her as a child always came with a painful plot twist.

The screen on her phone read *Broadcast Discontinued* after watching Haru’s dad collapse in pain, eyes white and black *stuff* coming from his nose and mouth. And after all her years *lying* to people, she couldn’t even tell her friends that everything was going to be okay.

She didn’t even believe that herself.

Chapter 114

Chapter 114

Ren could only sit in his seat, paralyzed by dread.

His friends were silent around him at the table where they all sat. No one said anything, or if they did, he didn't hear them. All he could do was stare down at his phone, blacked out with the phrase *"Programming Suspended"* .

Haru's father was *dead* .

It was his fault.

It was *his fault…*

"I…I…" Ren heard *that* voice, the timid and *horrified* tone of Haru, and his stomach began to churn violently. "I have to go…"

His mouth was too dry to find his own voice to ask her if she was okay. His mind was empty and couldn't find strength or courage to even face her. No one around him seemed to have the heart to stop Haru from bolting off and leaving them all sitting around looking like idiots.

He thought he heard someone crying once Haru had stormed off. He was still far too numb to realize who it was. All he could really do was try to *breathe* and pull himself out of his fog so he could hide his emotions from the group of friends that had looked up to him for months.

But he couldn't.

This was *his fault…*

"We did nothing wrong."

Morgana's voice hit him like lightning. The cat sounded so sure of himself, so confident, and it angered Ren. How could Morgana think

like that when Haru's father was *killed?* So what if it wasn't *them* , but how could they prove otherwise? How did Morgana know that maybe they had done *one* thing different and it cost a man his life? Haru would never see her dad again. Haru would likely never *trust* them again.

He started to worry if maybe Haru would talk to the police and now he would never see a future for as long as he lived…

It still paled in comparison to losing a family member so horrifically in front of the nation…

Ren had no idea how much time had passed as he sat in his chair. Eventually, he felt something on his arm that made him pull back at the contact. He saw Ann, who sat next to him, reaching out with her hand one more time in an effort to get through to him.

"Are you okay?"

He sure as hell wasn't about to admit that he was far from okay. He didn't feel he had the right. If anyone was to claim they were upset and *angry,* it was Haru. Telling as much to Ann was much harder than he thought.

"I'm okay…"

That was when he noticed the state of the rest of his friends. Ryuji looked pissed, yet somewhat reserved and scared. Yusuke was distant, but he looked confused and nervous as well. Futaba was the one he had heard crying moments before, but she had since thrown her face into Makoto's shoulder to drown out her cries. Makoto herself looked worried, but he knew her well enough to know she was concealing her fears and questions so she could be strong for the younger girl depending on her now.

Morgana's eyes lost much of the earlier confidence from before. "I think we should all head home. Some rest might do us some good."

He lost his mind if he truly believed Ren would be doing *any* resting and that it would do any *good* . But he had lost track of time. It was getting late. And as much as he hated the thought, there wasn't

much they could do that night that hadn't already been done. He couldn't call Haru and tell her he was sorry, because what would that do? He couldn't tell his friends that they needed to meet right away and figure out what went wrong. He sure as hell couldn't go to the police and tell them his team had nothing to do with a terrible *murder* …

Everyone around him nodded their heads and Ren simply followed their actions. No one said a word as they walked away from the theme park, where moments earlier, he had one of the most memorable times of his life. Smiling. Happy. Not a care in the world…

Futaba's muffled sobs were all that filled the silence as they all boarded a train to head back into town. All eyes were on the floor. All thoughts were left unspoken. There was no life. No banter. No *anything* that made the group so uniquely *them* . Everyone even went their separate ways without saying goodbye…

Makoto was the exception. Futaba was literally clinging to her for dear life. Ren both hated and admired the sight, but he knew it was clearly not the time to comment on it. A part of him wanted to tell Makoto that she didn't have to take Futaba home, that he would do it for her so she could get home herself, but a small part of him wanted to be with her. Her presence had always calmed him down in the past, and he needed that more than ever now. Despite the fact he *knew* Makoto was upset, she looked so strong and together when he was falling apart…

It was a simple act of comfort that brought the first wave of tears to his eyes. Makoto sat next to him on a nearly deserted train, looked over at him, and reached for his hand. She said nothing to him, but the touch was enough for him. She squeezed his hand a second later and sat closer to him when the train pulled away from the station. His other hand lifted to his eyes, trying to cover up the fact that he was cracking, but Makoto only squeezed his hand harder.

He couldn't even offer her a smile to bring some sort of relief to her…

By the time the train had pulled into Yongen-Jaya, Futaba had

grown quiet and Ren felt like he could have fallen asleep, despite the horrors that would await him in his nightmares. His muscles moved on their own, standing up, walking out of the train station, heading towards where he was hoping Sojiro *wouldn't* be waiting for them to return home.

Would Sojiro have heard about what happened? Would their presence and appearance clue him in on the fact that *they* were the mysterious Phantom Thieves? Would he get so angry over it that he would kick Ren out and he would have nowhere to go?

Sadly for him, Sojiro answered the door when they stood on the patio, and the sight of a terrified and tired Futaba brought out a concerning glare from the older man. "What happened?"

Futaba sniffed. Ren dropped his head. But Makoto was the strong one and answered his question. "We were out on our trip when we were watching the news. She's…um…" Ren felt terrible listening to her voice grow quiet and more reserved, yet she continued to power through. "She keeps mumbling about her mother…"

Like Ren needed more reasons to feel sick to his stomach…

Sojiro, thankfully, said nothing to them as he ushered all three of them into the house. The older man took Futaba from Makoto, then turned to the both of them before he reached the staircase. "It's getting late. Make sure she gets home safe, kid."

All Ren could do was nod his head and leave before Sojiro changed his mind and demanded to know more about what had happened. Maybe Sojiro saw the news as well and already had an idea of what was going on. Or maybe Sojiro knew better than to press them given their apparent state of mind and the time of night.

The walk out into the evening air was a blur. The walk around the corner was a blur. It wasn't until he felt something on his face that he was able to pull himself out of his fears and doubts and focus on the world around him.

It was dark, but Makoto was literally his light. "We did nothing wrong. Everything will be okay, Ren."

The simple admission was what finally snapped him in half. “How do you know that? How do you know Haru isn’t going to the police and telling them who we are, what we’ve done, who we’ve let *die?* How can you tell me everything is going to be okay when someone is *dead?”*

Despite his sharpness, Makoto didn’t cower away from him. She even took a step closer, never letting her hand fall from his face. “Whenever things have gone wrong, or have looked grim, you’ve *always* held your head high. You’ve been the support this team has needed since day one. But just like I have learned, you need to see that this isn’t your problem to deal with alone. Haru is our *friend* . And we will all find a way to come out of this, together.”

Ren pulled her into him a little too forcefully and held her tightly against him. He was terrified about what the future meant for him and his friends, but he had no words to describe what Makoto had just done to him. She didn’t push him away or blame him for something out of his control. She didn’t think any less of him being in a shocked state of mind. She could have left him alone to drown in his own fears, but she not only chose to stay, but she chose to be *strong* .

It was pitiful, but all he could tell her was, “Thank you…” Once the words left his lips, she hugged him back with an equal amount of strength. She was likely just as nervous as he was. The future looked bleak at best, but it made him feel so much better knowing he wouldn’t be alone.

We will all find a way to come out of this, together.

He had no idea how long he stood in the middle of the street with her, but he figured it would be best to get her home before he had to face her parents. Had they watched the news, too? And if so, what was going to happen when Makoto returned home? Anything? Would they be angry with *him* as well?

“I should probably get you home,” he said, his voice so hoarse and quiet he didn’t think he had spoken. Makoto slowly pulled away from him, her head lowered, but her arms still hanging loosely around him.

“Everything will be okay.” She looked up at him, and he saw that determination burning in her eyes. It made him numb for a different reason. “Everything will be okay.”

This time, he *did* offer her a weak smile. Because she deserved something. But when her hand found itself on his face again, all of his emotions twisted and roared to the surface again. He *needed* her and he was suddenly drawn into her like she was the remedy for his worries.

His mind blanked, but he was oddly aware of what was happening. Makoto stepped back into him. His hand landed on the back of her neck. He wasn’t sure of who leaned in first, maybe they both did, but the second her lips were on his, a fire erupted in his chest.

It was literally half a second, a simple touch, and far from perfect since he kind of missed. But it was so much more at the same time. It was a sign that she was there for him, that she would fight with him, that she would *save* him if he ever felt like he was going under.

And that blush on her face would never *not* make his heart do flips in his chest. Instead of call her out on it, he guided her back into him and *this* time, he made sure to kiss her right. To his surprise, she didn’t try and pull away from him after a second, or even two, and he could have sworn she was trying to push him more into her…

He didn’t really think about anything except how *wonderful* he felt.

“Makoto?”

Hearing an unfamiliar voice calling out for her, she was quick to come to her senses and step away from him. Ren would have smiled at her reaction, but he was in a little bit of a daze. He had always imagined his first kiss being dramatic and powerful, and he was certainly *weak* over it. But it also gave him a clear mind, a fresh take on everything, and he felt like she had breathed her own confidence into him.

“W-What are you d-doing here?”

Right. Someone had called out to her. Ren blinked several times

and turned to find a familiar face approaching them. Mitsuru? If that was her name? Makoto didn't run and hide, so he figured there was no harm in her spotting the two of them together.

"We've been looking for you," came the other lady's reply. Her eyes turned to him, and despite being a friend of Makoto's, Ren froze under her stare. "You're Amamiya."

Ren heard Makoto sigh next to him, then she came to stand between both of them. "This is Mitsuru. She's a family friend."

He figured he should bow and give a proper introduction, but she was *very* intimidating. So much so that he didn't even notice two other people rushing up to where they were all standing. One of them walked right up to Makoto and wrapped her in her arms.

"I'm so glad you're safe."

It was then that Ren realized how *late* it was and now he was going to have to face the wrath of *both* of her parents for not bringing her home on time…

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

If Ren thought Mitsuru was intimidating, Sanada could have *murdered* him with his glare. Ren also didn't know if he had caught him kissing his *daughter* and that was why he was so angry, or if he had been asking over something else. Either way, he felt he was a dead man.

Mitsuru was kind enough to put a hand on Sanada's shoulder. "We can discuss this later. The only thing that matters is that they are safe."

That didn't stop Sanada from reaching towards him, grabbing him by his collar, and yanking him into his face. "Did you kill him? What the hell did you *do?"*

"Dad, stop it." Makoto came into his sight and placed a hand on her father's arm. But that accusation was enough to bring all his fears back into his mind and his heart. He knew his team didn't *kill* Okumura, but trying to explain that to someone without being able to

provide *proof* was going to be impossible. He was suddenly terrified that Sanada was going to arrest him, to tell him his trust in Ren was misplaced, and that cut deeper than he thought it would.

Ren was released a second or two later. Sanada sighed heavily, running a hand over his face, but then he turned his back to him. Minako walked up next to him and offered Ren an apologetic look, but it was too late. And he was sure that if someone like Sanada was going to stand against him, then the rest of the world was bound to follow.

“Go pack your things, Amamiya. Don’t take long. The trains are going to shut down soon.”

Ren’s heart started hammering in his chest. Why did Sanada want him to pack up? Was he getting thrown into jail? Was he going to get thrown out of his home? Was this the beginning of the end for him and his friends?

“I didn’t kill him.” He *had* to make a stand. He was weak in voicing his plea, but he *had* to make them all understand. “I don’t know what happened, but I swear to you that I didn’t *kill* him.”

The older man turned back to him, as if testing Ren by trying to catch any physical indicators of lying. But it was silent. Makoto was facing away from him. Mitsuru and Sanada both eyed him carefully. Minako was the one to break the tension as she stepped around the group and approached Ren with a small smile.

“I know you’re probably worried, but you shouldn’t be alone after an event like this.” Her smile did little to calm him, but her words left him confused, yet hopeful. “We know you didn’t do anything, but it’s not safe for you to be out here. We’re taking you back home with us for a few days.”

Ren literally fell back on his feet. “W-What?”

Mitsuru also took a step closer to him. “While I’ve been assured you and your friends are innocent, this is only the beginning. It’s time we heard your side of the story and come to terms with what has happened. However, the police are likely to start pursing this with

larger numbers with a murder, so it would be wise to keep you under our care until we can find out who is really behind the scenes."

This couldn't be real. It couldn't be. There was no way in hell Sanada was going to let him stay with Makoto and let him live to remember it. There was no way someone who didn't even *know* him wanted to work with him to figure out what had really happened to Okumura.

Right?

"Hurry up, Amamiya."

"What about my probation officer?" Ren was desperate to believe that these people wanted to help him in his greatest time of need, but he also knew not to expect the best when it had happened to him once before. "He's going to show up and I need to be here."

Minako gave him another smile, but she didn't say anything. Makoto looked back to him, to her mom, then back to her father when he loudly exhaled after a moment of nothing. "I've talked to him. He owes me a favor or two, so I told him you would be under my care for a few days. So hurry up or I'm going to have to leave you behind."

The only reason Ren walked off to Leblanc had been because he figured he was in a dream and nothing was real and he sure as hell didn't want to piss off Sanada and have him kill him. He rushed up the stairs, almost tripping on the last one, then grabbed a small bag and started throwing in whatever he could get his hands on.

"Wow, Ren. He must really like you if he's willing to protect you!"

Morgana's words made him stop packing up his things. Was that what Sanada was doing? Protecting him? But…hadn't he been angry with him for possibly killing a man? That thought got him hurrying along again. "I doubt that."

Morgana, however, would not be swayed. "I'm serious! He came out here to look for you. If he wanted to arrest you, he would have brought back up, not his friend!"

Ren threw his bag over his shoulder, then lowered his gaze down to the floor where the cat was smiling up at him. “You really think we did nothing wrong?”

The smile disappeared from Morgana’s face. “Even if we did something wrong, which I don’t think we did, our intent was never to kill him. I think the guy with the black mask is involved.” Morgana began to follow behind Ren as he carefully walked down the stairs. “Maybe they will know more about him than we do.”

He could hope, but truthfully, he just didn’t want to fall into a trap. Or face a terrifying interrogation once they thought he was comfortable. But it wasn’t just a random family taking him in under the guise of keeping him safe. He had so much respect for both of Makoto’s parents, and for Makoto herself. There was no way they were luring him away to bait him into confessing.

It would also be nice to finally hear from Makoto’s friends. He had never spoken to Mitsuru, but she seemed to be their intelligence leader. If he came clean to her, maybe they really could work together to bring down the ones who were *murdering* instead of saving.

Regardless, he knew he wasn’t going to be sleeping that night anyway.

Chapter 115

Chapter 115

Akihiko had a hard time coming to terms with allowing Amamiya to stay in his household.

The night's events had been a blur. Minako had made dinner, because that was something she always did. He couldn't do much in terms of activities, so he had been confined to the couch afterwards. One of them had been flipping through the channels to find something to pass the night with, but he remembered vaguely going back to the news because it looked *strange* . There was a man, Okumura, *confessing* , and that was all it took to draw him in.

Then Okumura grabbed his chest, his eyes rolled over, the black ooze appeared on his face.

To say Akihiko had been horrified was an understatement.

It hadn't been the first time he had watched a man die in a similar fashion.

His mind had blanked until he felt Minako shaking him. But then his mind ran away with him. It was the Phantom Thieves, he was sure of it, but it was all so very *wrong* . He knew a few of the kids and Makoto would *never* purposely engage in murder or intent to kill. None of them would. So how did their target find himself *dead?*

He had far too many questions, but he had ignored Minako's questions and concerns and got right to work. His first matter of business was to get a hold of Mitsuru and have her meet him at the closest train station. Once he was off the phone with her, he had called up an old co-worker, to be specific, Amamiya's probation officer. Akihiko had no idea *why* he felt that call had been necessary, but if the police were slowly catching up to the group of teens, this recent turn of events would push them into a frenzy. No one was safe. Especially a teenager with a criminal record and links to many of the past targets.

Akihiko was fully aware the dangers of being cornered about a crime they didn't commit. And if the wrong officers, or worse yet, *Sae* got a hold of Amamiya first, the poor kid would likely never see the light of day again.

He didn't remember saying anything to Minako about following after him, but he figured she was worried about what had happened, what it meant for Makoto and her friends, and if he was about to beat some answers out of an innocent and terrified kid.

He hadn't actually anticipated running into Makoto when he had made the trip to Yongen-Jaya, but he was relieved at the same time. Since Minako had been adamant about following him, he didn't want Makoto to return to an empty house after what had happened. Would she have even known that their recent target was dead?

Amamiya had known. His expression when he saw them had been a dead giveaway. And while he so desperately wanted to know what had gone wrong, the kid was clearly upset. He knew that if he continued to take his worries and confusion out on Amamiya, he was likely to close up for good. In order to *help* , to clear his name and Makoto's, Akihiko needed information. To get truthful information, he had to be patient.

They all waited outside the café for Amamiya to gather his things, and it was the first time Akihiko felt the events drain him of energy. He leaned back against the building behind him, trying to ignore the curious stares coming from Minako and Makoto.

"You really *do* like him, don't you?"

He chose not to answer Minako's playful comment.

"We should save our investigation for tomorrow." Mitsuru whipped out her phone and appeared to make a few texts to people. "For now, the only thing that matters is that they are all safe."

Makoto took a few steps so she could stand right in front of him. "We didn't do anything wrong. You have to believe me."

Minako put a hand on her shoulder while he took a deep breath. He

really was tired. “I don’t doubt you, Makoto, but you can’t deny that the public is going to think differently. This puts you all in serious trouble, innocent or not.”

He didn’t know what to make of her small smile a second later. “You really do trust Ren.”

He sure as hell had some explaining to do, that was for sure.

No one said anything on the way back home. Amamiya was quiet, his eyes always on the ground and never once looking up. He sat next to Minako on the train, and every now and then, she would shoot Akihiko a sad look from across the aisle. He wasn’t sure what she wanted him to do to make Amamiya feel better, but he likely needed some rest. He probably had questions and doubts himself. He was young and had been branded a criminal once before for something he probably didn’t really do.

Akihiko wasn’t a hundred percent sure if the police had any of the actual Phantom Thieves members on their radar, but he wasn’t taking any chances. He assumed *he* wasn’t a suspect anymore, or they were keeping him on the back burner for something as beautiful as Okumura’s death to pin on his head. He knew the police had gone to Shujin, and if they were *smart* , they could have caught at least Amamiya, Ryuji, and Makoto for being involved with two of their targets.

He was suddenly grateful for the eyes on him. Perhaps it had bought the teenagers some time.

Time that may be slowly running out for them.

“One child without someone to talk to is all it will take to crush you.”

Granted he didn’t care for Amamiya’s place in his daughter’s life, he was another teenage victim without anyone to take his side. There wasn’t a lot Akihiko felt like he could do for him, but he didn’t want him to be alone after something as devastating as a death. When they all sat down with Mitsuru to go over details the following night, he could make his judgments then.

The first time anyone had spoken had been right outside their building. Mitsuru grabbed his arm while the rest of them made their way inside. “Make sure he returns after school tomorrow. We have much we need to clear up.”

Akihiko only nodded his head before she turned to leave. He was grateful that she wasn’t going to question anyone tonight given the hour, but at the same time, he didn’t know how much sleep anyone would get without answers. He also didn’t know how much information Amamiya would forget about within another few hours. But again, he reminded himself that Amamiya wouldn’t respond well to a serious interrogation when he was tired, emotional, and just as confused as they were.

It took him quite some time to stumble to the front door, but once inside the apartment, Minako, Makoto, and Amamiya were all sitting in the living room. No one said anything, but Minako shot up from her seat to meet him first. At first, he expected her to ask him what they were going to do since he literally threw this on everyone, but instead she smiled like she had something to be happy about.

“I’m proud of you,” was all she said to him before wrapping her arms around his shoulders. He didn’t push her away and let her lean against him, even if he didn’t feel her emotional hug was really something he deserved. Eventually, she released him, wiping at her eyes for a second, then beaming up at him with a light in her eyes that always made him warm with embarrassment.

Akihiko stepped around her before he grew *too* warm and walked into the middle of the room. “I’m sorry for just throwing this on you, all of you, but you’ll be safer here.” He sighed as soon as he realized that he really didn’t plan any of this and had no idea where the boy would even *sleep* . He didn’t want Amamiya to sleep on the couch in case he took off in the middle of the night. Sae’s old room was pretty much empty, and while he didn’t really want anyone in there for the hope that one day Sae would use it again, it wasn’t ready to be slept in either.

And he sure as hell wasn’t about to let Amamiya sleep in the same room as his daughter. “You’ll have to sleep on the couch tonight, but while you’re at school tomorrow, I’ll try and get something better for

you."

"No, this is fine." Amamiya also sounded so tired and beaten. For once, Akihiko pitied him. "Thank you."

He doubted Amamiya would sleep no matter where he was, but Makoto did her best to make him as comfortable as she could. By the time they had tried to sleep themselves, it was a little after midnight. He was far too wired and curious to close his mind off to fall asleep, but at one point, Minako shifted in the bed next to him and he soon felt her hand in his hair.

Knowing what she was doing, he grabbed her wrist with a quiet laugh. "It's fine. I've got too much to think about."

"I really am proud of you, Aki."

"Why?" Given his state of mind in the past few days, Akihiko figured she was just happy that he was *fighting* . That a small part of him still cared about people. Or she could have been referring to the fact that he went out of his way to help Makoto's *boyfriend* when he wasn't the fondest of that thought.

Even in the darkness, her smile brightened up the room. "You didn't even *blink* about helping someone. A child you know needed your help, a child who was innocent, and you dropped everything to help him." Her fingers danced around in his hair again. "I thought this part of you was gone forever, and I can't even tell you how happy it makes me to see it right now."

He tried to contain his grumble under his breath, but a soft laughter from Minako told him he didn't do it well enough. "This doesn't mean I like him."

"Whatever," she whispered as she leaned over to kiss him on the cheek. "One day, you'll have to admit it. And that I was right this entire time."

He really hoped she didn't catch the slight roll of his eyes as he chose to remain silent.

It wasn't even an hour later when Akihiko could tell Minako had

fallen back asleep. It made him feel oddly better, knowing she was able to find the peace of mind to sleep so he could go off into his own mind. He was still horrified that he had watched Okumura literally die on national TV. He had flashbacks to being in the back of Mitsuru's car with his boss, and just like Okumura, right before he could talk about those involved in a corruption scandal, they died.

It was not a coincidence. While Akihiko knew very little about Okumura, he had heard some grumblings about the way he treated his employees. There was also talk about him joining politics instead of managing his currently growing business. But there was only *one* person that could make that kind of "heart-attack" death look *real* while secretly *murdering* someone in cold blood.

The guy with the black mask.

Goro Akechi.

To this day, Akihiko still had his doubts that Akechi really could do all of this and smile so politely for the cameras. He would be the first teenager Akihiko would ever know who could pull off some kind of Jekyll and Hyde persona that well. It was terrifying, because not only could he murder anyone, no one would believe that a masked man was hunting down people in an alternate world.

Then something came back to him.

"I believe they are thoughtful individuals who perform like, let's say, Jekyll and Hyde. One day, under their good name, they will kill."

If Akechi truly was the culprit, had he *planned* to kill someone the Phantom Thieves went after? Were they set up? And if so, *how?* Makoto would have said something to him if Akechi was constantly harassing the group or following them around. He had even warned her about him specifically.

But why Akechi? What was he gaining out of this? And why did he start causing the mental shutdowns at such a young age? Had he, or was he taking on someone else's job? Mitsuru and Fuuka's investigation into him gave no serious clues to point them in one direction or another. The biggest piece of information had come from

Amamiya, telling him that Akechi could in fact hear his cat, and that was a damning statement.

It just wasn't good enough.

Akechi had been to the Metaverse long before him and his friends had gone to Sae's palace the first time. He had the means, which was extremely rare for just anyone, but what Akihiko struggled with was the motive.

He worried his answer was buried in a link with Shido he was never going to be able to uncover.

Thinking too much, Akihiko needed to get out of bed and walk around for a few minutes. He was getting better about walking around, but the first few steps didn't go so well. How he didn't manage to wake Minako, he counted as a blessing. But it didn't hit him until he made it down the hall into the living room that he wasn't alone like he usually was.

Amamiya was sitting up on the couch, hands over his face and fingers pulling at his hair. His cat (he forgot about him, too) sat next to him, rubbing his head into the boy's side. Amamiya was clearly upset, the sheets around him tossed around like he had woken from a nightmare, and Akihiko couldn't just walk away from him.

He took a seat on the couch that was closest to where Amamiya was sitting. Akihiko tried to keep his voice low so not to freak him out, but after calling to him a few times with no response, he pushed himself back up to stand in front of him. The cat looked up, but Akihiko grabbed Amamiya's hands from his face as he dropped down on the table behind him.

Akihiko was going to ask him what was wrong when he saw the tears in his eyes. Amamiya looked at him, but looked through him at the same time. His cat was the one who seemed to get through to him when he jumped on his lap and pawed at his chest.

Amamiya spoke first. "Sorry…"

"Why are you sorry?"

He leaned into one hand like he was tired and had a headache. His eyes dropped to the floor again while his other hand grabbed at the fabric of his pants. “I woke you up.”

Akihiko tried to hide his chuckle. “I was already up. I forgot you were here when I saw you like this.”

Amamiya made a move to wipe at his face to try and act like he wasn’t scared and falling apart. Akihiko was willing to give him a few minutes to pull himself together, but he didn’t walk away from him.

The cat’s big blue eyes turned to him. “We didn’t kill anyone.”

It was still hard to grasp a talking animal, but that was a discussion for another time. “I’m not saying you did.” Akihiko took his chance to move to the space beside Amamiya. “So if you did nothing wrong, tell me why you’re so upset.”

Amamiya grimaced and his hand holding his head grabbed at his hair again. “A man is dead because we went after him.”

“But you didn’t kill him.”

“N-No…”

Akihiko didn’t want to push him too far, but Amamiya needed to get something off his chest and he wouldn’t. “Look, I may have come down on you a little hard earlier today, but I know you didn’t kill him. I can see that. So whatever you can tell me so I can help you, tell me.”

His response was simple, yet heartbreaking. “I’m scared.”

He had dealt with hundreds of kids the same age being afraid to come clean or get someone in trouble by speaking out. He could understand Amamiya’s concerns, given the bizarre nature of the events. However, if Akihiko knew *one* thing, it was that teenagers just needed someone to *listen* to them.

“Talk to me, Amamiya.”

“It’s okay, Ren.”

Amamiya returned to his earlier position with both hands over his face. But he at least opened up to him. “I’m scared that Haru is never going to forgive us for what happened. She’s going to the police and telling them who we are and how it was our fault. I’m terrified I’ll spend the rest of my life behind bars. All the while I’m so *angry* with myself because someone is *dead* and I can’t say anything to get eyes off of me and my friends.”

His words sparked something in Akihiko. “Haru? Is she the one who asked you to go after Okumura?”

“Kind of,” came the cat’s voice. His eyes also lowered. “I…I may have pushed them all to go after him. I went into his palace by myself and pulled her in along with me. The reason they followed after us was because they were worried about me.”

One of Amamiya’s hands fell to the cat’s head. “We originally heard about Okumura from our website. Many people were asking us to change his heart, but it wasn’t until we met Haru and learned her story that we went through with it.”

“So,” Akihiko started, trying to wrap his head around what was happening. “The *public* swayed you into this at first?”

Amamiya nodded his head. “It was a little overwhelming to be held in such high regard, which is what we all fought about as a team.”

“And I left because they didn’t want to go through with it.”

If Akechi and whoever hired him had planned this all out, they did a hell of a job. But this had been something he tried to warn Makoto about before. The more and more they made a name for themselves, the more it would backfire in their face when one thing went wrong. The public was sure to be in an outrage over this. And anyone who *knew* that Amamiya and his friends were the Phantom Thieves would now be terrified and would likely sell them out.

It was a perfectly executed plan, but where it started and *why* , he had yet to find out.

“Why did you take me in?”

Akihiko hadn't been expecting the question, but he was able to keep the surprise out of his voice. "What do you mean?"

Now Amamiya just looked exhausted. "You came all that way to give me a place to stay when I could be in my own room, my own space, and losing my mind alone." Then, he looked over at him for the first time all night. "Why?"

The answer came a little too easily off his tongue. "Because no one should be alone after an event like this."

Amamiya threw his head into his hands again, but said nothing in return. Akihiko felt like he should defend himself in case Amamiya was offended. "I should have asked you what you would have preferred, yes, but you losing your mind would benefit no one. The longer you would have sat alone and allowed yourself to drown in your despair, the harder it would be for us to help you."

There was a small laugh that came from Amamiya, then his hands lowered to his knees and he shook his head slowly. "The last time I thought someone would stand by my side, she turned against me and I was slapped with an assault charge. I really thought you were going to arrest me, or take me to the police station and tear me apart. But here I am, inside your home, being treated like a *friend* rather than the enemy."

Akihiko didn't want to go so far as to call him a *friend* , but then Amamiya lifted his eyes with a small hint of a smile. "I wish I could tell you what this means to me."

Had Amamiya been a stranger sitting in his office at the station, he would have told him to think nothing of it. It was his job to listen to others' stories. It was his job to help. But it *was* Amamiya, his daughter's boyfriend, and now someone he had seen at his worst.

Instead of a reply, Akihiko pushed himself up off the couch. "It might be hard, but try and get some sleep. Nothing can be changed now, so tomorrow, come home from school and Mitsuru will try and make sense of your story."

Amamiya nodded his head and his cat jumped off his legs and to the

back of the couch where he curled up. Before he could make it down the hall and back to his room, he heard Amamiya call out to him.

“Thank you.” Then he wrapped himself in one of the blankets Makoto had given him. “…Thank you.”

It was at that moment, standing in his own living room, with a teenager he barely knew, that Akihiko told himself he *had* to get better. He *would* get better. Because giving someone hope when they had felt like the world was closing in on them was a powerful feeling. Powerful enough that he told himself he would talk to his doctor in the morning and schedule the earliest possible day for a surgery.

This fight wasn’t about him anymore. It was about those who were *good* getting pushed around by those who were *bad* and thought they could get away with it. He wouldn’t let his daughter, both of them, or Amamiya and his friends get torn to pieces because they didn’t have the strength to overpower the enemy.

He would fight for them, even if it cost him his life.

Chapter 116

Chapter 116

Despite the events of the night before, Minako slept a little *too* good.

Akihiko had literally taken her breath away when he frantically did all he could to ensure Ren's safety. He didn't even *blink* , just got right to work. The entire thing with the unknown (to her) man's death was chaotic and confusing and terrifying. Those emotions had come out when Akihiko grabbed Ren around the collar earlier that night, but that was as far as he went. And it wasn't enough to make her think any differently.

That spark she so desperately wanted to see in him again, tried for days to bring back, and *Ren* was the one to get through to him.

She was also thankful that Akihiko was likely too wrapped up in his own thoughts as they tried to go to sleep that night. She was so *happy* that she may have cried herself to sleep and that was why she slept so well.

Like many times in the past, Akihiko was up and out of bed long before she woke up. Minako always thought it would be nice to just have a day to sit in bed and cuddle and do nothing, but knowing he was up meant he was likely *thinking* . And if he was *thinking* , he was doing so to help. Which meant he was coming back to her. It brought a warm smile to her face that she could feel deep in her soul.

Akihiko liked Ren, she knew it, but this kind of act was nothing she could put into words. She was so proud of him, and she was determined to do all she could to support him as he found his ground again.

When she finally wiped at her eyes and got out of bed, she found Akihiko sitting at the table, empty plate in front of him, his phone in the hand not supporting his head. The sight of him *eating* and *working* again made her a little weak, but she threw on a smile and

walked up to where he was sitting.

“Good morning.”

There was also a glow in his eyes that she didn’t realize she would miss. “I hope I didn’t wake you.”

She slowly shook her head, once again trying to keep her emotions in check. “Not at all.”

When she couldn’t say anything else, Akihiko turned his attention back to his phone. “Makoto made you a plate for breakfast.” Then, he pushed his phone away and looked over at her. “Are you alright?”

A small laugh burst from her lungs as she came to take the seat next to him. She reached for his hand and held it tightly between both of hers. “I never thought I would see this side of you again.”

He gave her a confused look, but then his eyes dropped from hers. “If this fight was just about me, then maybe I wouldn’t be trying. But it’s not. And maybe now I see what you were trying to tell me before. This isn’t about beating a bad guy, or trying to get over on people who have had it out for me since day one. This is about a kid who has never had the right people on his side when he needed them.”

His eyes hardened as she felt a tightness in her throat. “I will *not* let an innocent child suffer because I’m too afraid to make a stand myself.”

Minako tried her best to give him a smile, but it was hard to do while fighting back a wave of tears. “Anything you need me to do, I will.” And it was all she could say before the dam broke and she had to release his hand to wipe her eyes dry.

Akihiko, in turn, grabbed one of her arms so he could hold her hand. “You’ve been nothing but supportive this entire time. So from now on, anything I know, you will know. If I’m going to fight this war, I need you to fight with me. And I promise you that I will keep you and our children safe.”

“Aki…” She had to take a second to clear her throat. “I’ll be right here, by your side, until this is all over.”

He smiled at her, and it was one of the firsts in weeks that she could tell he *meant* . He squeezed her hand. “And the first favor I need to ask of you is for you to take me to the hospital.”

Minako stared back blankly at him. “R-Right now?”

He released her hand to stretch out his back, then gave her another smile. “Doc’s a little miffed since he planned on going on vacation this week, but he said if it got me off his back for a month, he would do me this favor.”

She was going to question how in the world he had scheduled something that usually requires weeks of notice in *one day* , but another part of her was too thrilled to ask. “O-Of course!”

“I’m probably going to be out of commission for a while, but you know me. I’ve never been one to stay down for long.”

He was acting playful, confident, and he was fighting. It literally knocked the wind out of her. She felt a burn in her heart that made her feel like she was younger and falling in love with him for the first time. And all she could do in the moment was laugh.

Her Akihiko was back.

“I should probably go get ready then,” she said as she pushed her chair back. Instead of walking towards her room, she came to stand behind him, wrapped her arms around his shoulders, and dropped her head on his. “I’m so happy you’re feeling better, Aki. I really am.”

His hands lifted to her arms. “I owe a lot of this to you.” He turned in his seat so he could look up at her. “Thank you, Minako.”

She kissed him then, but she was still reeling enough that it did little to express how she truly felt. She also didn’t think she had the time to. “I should thank Ren for this, too, since you did a lot of this for him.”

Minako smiled widely as Akihiko grumbled and released her. “Make sure you eat your breakfast. Makoto made it for you, and I have a feeling it’s going to be a long day.”

Her smile began to hurt her face as she walked into the kitchen to find the wrapped plate Makoto had made for her. What she didn't tell Akihiko was that she was already fueled up and ready to go. Just the sight of him returning to his usual self was all she needed. But she sat at the table with him to eat her daughter's hard work (had she made one for Ren, too? She giggled inwardly at the thought) and to enjoy Akihiko's company.

An hour later, her stomach full, her heart full, and properly dressed, Minako started to pick up on small signs of Akihiko's apprehension. If he was sitting, he wasn't sitting *still* . If they were around a group of people, he was eavesdropping. If he was holding her hand, even as she walked next to him to the hospital, his hand was tight around hers.

She couldn't tell where his nervousness was coming from. Was he worried about his surgery? It had come upon him pretty quickly. Maybe he wasn't ready? Was he expecting something to go wrong? Or was he worried about Makoto, her friends, and the looming conversation they were supposed to have that night? Had it been postponed because he needed to be at the hospital?

"It's alright, Minako."

They were both sitting in the waiting room, but Akihiko was far from calm. She was going to question him when he spoke up for her. "I just really hope this is enough. If I'm truly going to be of any help, I can't get stuck behind a desk or under a mountain of paperwork. I *have* to be out there. I can't do that if this doesn't go well…"

She dropped a hand to his thigh and leaned against him. "You'll be okay. And while you may have no choice for a few weeks, I know that's not going to keep you down."

She felt his hand on top of hers. "Right…"

She wanted to say more to him, to bring back that spirit he had shown her over an hour ago, but his doctor not so kindly called out to him. "You know, usually I am thrilled to see you, but we're gonna need to make this as quick as possible or you owe me a new vacation."

The doctor was kind enough to let her stay with Akihiko while they prepped him for his surgery. He never once let go of her hand. She did her best to distract him with random stories from their past and then on to entertaining the idea of Makoto being married and having kids and being able to hold another little child again.

And to her complete surprise, Akihiko didn't balk or fire back with some disgusted comment. She wouldn't say he *smiled* at her, but he did chuckle and look away from her. She could not resist the urge to comment on it. "You want to be a grandfather?"

"No," he replied quickly, bringing another smile to her face. "But if it's what Makoto wants, many, *many* years from now, and she's happy, then I'm not going to stop her."

It was the perfect way to end the conversation. He gave her one last smile and squeeze of the hand before he was taken out of her sight. A nurse was nice enough to lead her back to the waiting room, telling her that Akihiko should be allowed to leave that day, if all went well. The surgery itself would only be a few hours at tops, followed by an hour observation, then he could recover at home.

Now, all Minako had to do was *wait.*

She flipped through some of the magazines in the room. She texted Yukari about what was happening. She got a surprise message from Makoto asking her to keep her posted about her dad's visit. It made her curious to know how early Akihiko had gotten a hold of his doctor, assuming he had told Makoto that morning, but she replied back that she would let her know when he was out.

She figured the remaining hour or two would be her losing her mind drowning in boredom and anticipation.

It was quite the opposite.

"Minako."

She pulled her eyes up from her phone and almost dropped it to the floor. "S-Sae?"

To her surprise, Sae extended an arm to her, a coffee cup in her

hand. “I assume you still prefer sugar over coffee, yes?”

Her demeanor was calm, easygoing, and Minako had to blink several times to make sure she was truly awake. Sae was acting like she had in the past, months ago, long before their recently strained relationship. It was hard to turn away from her. “Um, thank you?”

Minako reached out and took the cup from her hand, but Sae did not sit down next to her. “It’s a relatively nice day outside. Why don’t you get some fresh air?”

She didn’t even hesitate. Minako nodded her head and pushed herself up off her chair. It wasn’t until they were both outside, sitting down on a bench in the warm autumn sun, that Minako asked the first question that came to her mind.

“How did you know where to find me?”

Sae took a sip from her cup, then shrugged her shoulders. “Never underestimate my ways of finding things out.”

So, Minako asked her second question. “Well then, what do you want to talk about?”

That was when the silence began to plague her mind. Why was Sae there looking for her? She couldn’t possibly be there to check on her father. She had clearly come to speak to her, as she came prepared with a gift. Or was it meant to lower her defenses so Sae could strike when she was weak?

“I’m under the impression that Ren Amamiya is staying with you now.”

Of course Sae wouldn’t come looking for her to have a mother-daughter outing. She came for information. The coffee was a bargaining chip. And it hurt. “And why are you asking?”

Sae repeated her earlier actions, sipping from her coffee slowly with a growing smile. “I just can’t fathom Akihiko allowing a teenage *criminal* to stay with you, given that Makoto goes to school with him.”

Did Sae know they were dating? Did Sae also know that *Akihiko*

was the one who took Ren in? Why was she asking about Ren at all? “He’s not a criminal.”

Sae made eye contact with her for the first time since she called out to her. “Is that what *you* think?”

Her heart couldn’t take it anymore. Minako dropped her cup, barely touched, to the space beside her. “What do you want? Stop beating around the bush and just ask me.”

“Fine.” Minako held her breath and clenched her hands on her lap. “Why did you go out of your way to take Amamiya in?”

She felt trapped. She knew she couldn’t be forthcoming, since Sae would likely use it against her, but the longer she stalled, the more Sae would grow demanding. “You’d have to ask your father.”

“And I’m asking *you.”*

“I don’t know, Sae,” she said with much more determination. She figured it was the best way to convince Sae she didn’t have the answers and she would leave.

She didn’t. “You’re hiding something.”

“What do you want me to say?” Minako never imagined having to be so *snappy* with her daughter. But she was upset. She was still waiting to hear something about Akihiko. Ren and Makoto were in serious trouble. She felt justified. “But the next time you show up trying to bribe me into your trap, I won’t fall for it.”

“You’re not only being evasive and defensive, I also know you.” Sae’s tone sent chills down her spine. “So don’t you *dare* sit there and tell me you don’t know when I know you do.”

Minako felt a prick in her heart and she took a deep breath to keep it there and not behind her eyes. “What’s happened to you? You were never this angry about anything before. Now, it’s like you want to watch the world burn.”

Sae scoffed at her. “I tend to get very angry at people who are hiding key facts for my biggest victory ever.”

She felt something weird then. Like time had stopped, her heart had stopped, *everything* had stopped. It took her another second or two to catch her breath, but her mind wasn't in the best mood to figure out what that feeling had been. Whatever it was, it wasn't *good* .

"No matter how you try to deny it, you're still our daughter, Sae." She leaned into her hands, a slight headache making her dizzy. "You go out of your way for your father more than you claim to hate him. And deep down, I can see how badly you want to come back. I can see how sorry you are for all of this animosity over the years. Because *I* know *you* . I held you in my arms as a baby. I watched you grow up. I watched you hold and play with your sister. But something changed this year…and it has nothing to do with your father."

Minako pounced the second she caught Sae's hesitation. "If you're afraid or being harassed about something at work, please tell me. Please…"

It was the longest minute of her life, watching her daughter's eyes darken with rage, then lose that fire all together. When Sae lifted a hand to the side of her head, Minako held her breath and waited.

Several deep breaths later, Sae finally spoke again. "…I don't know."

That was all it took for Minako to reach out with her hand and grab one of Sae's. "Talk to me. Please."

Sae turned away from her, but Minako refused to let her go. "I'm fine…"

Minako didn't speak, but she pulled on Sae's arm until she was facing her again. The look in her eyes broke her heart. If she had pushed harder when Sae was being so stubborn, maybe she could have helped her earlier. But she instead ran away from her, thinking Sae was just *dead* and nothing would ever bring her back.

"I know I don't have the right to tell you this, but you can talk to me. If you're scared, or worried, or stressed, I will do everything I can to help you."

Sae leaned back in her seat, sighed heavily, then held her head in one hand. “I’m tired of not knowing the answers. I’m tired of people assuming I’m holding back information when I clearly know nothing. I’m tired of people accusing me of being a failure because I know nothing. I’m tired of thinking there’s more to all of these cases than what meets the eye, yet every time I feel like I’m getting somewhere, something else happens to pull me away from it.”

Minako’s heart beat frantically in her chest. “Your father has been oddly quiet about something he’s been looking into. Maybe if the two of you sat down and talked about this, then maybe you could find the answers you’re looking for.”

She heard rather than saw Sae’s grimace. “He won’t speak to me. He’s under the impression that I’m going to take his information and hang him with it.”

Minako didn’t doubt Akihiko was hiding anything from Sae, but she also wouldn’t put it past Sae to do exactly that. “So stop by the house one day, off the record, and *talk* .”

The second Sae chuckled, her heart dropped in her chest. “But yet, even after admitting to you all of this, you just want me to *stop by* . When last night, you took in a *criminal* just because?”

The sharpness of her words made Minako blink. “What?”

And Sae turned back into that angry child who hated everything. “Never once would you have gone out of *your* way to bring *me* back home! But then I hear you are more than willing to allow a convicted *criminal* to stay with you! So don’t sit here and tell me that I can talk to you, my own *mother* , when I’m never your priority!”

Her words snapped something in her. Before Sae could get up, Minako forcefully grabbed her arm and pulled her back down. Her voice was foreign even to her own ears. “Akihiko took him in because Ren was *scared* . Because there’s people like you who roam the streets looking for innocent victims to attack after something as grand scale as that man’s death last night. Akihiko put you above everything else in his life months ago, but you didn’t want his help. So now that he’s looked the other way you’re *angry* about

it?”

Sae lost much of her anger, but there was still a fire burning in her eyes. “Interesting that you mention Okumura’s death and that just so happens to be why Akihiko allowed Amamiya to stay with you.”

Minako’s shoulders dropped with her exhale. “And he was right, you know. Had he done nothing, you would have gone after Ren and shown him no mercy. And if I recall, the last interrogation you hosted did not end well for your father, the *criminal* .”

She let Sae throw herself to her feet before she looked back over at her, eyes simmering in rage. “Then leave a message for the both of them. They’re both prime suspects, and my chances of victory in a courtroom are impossible to beat.”

Minako managed to get one last comment in before Sae stormed off. “Your father has always beaten the odds. I suggest you prepare yourself for a loss.”

When Sae glared and walked away, Minako brought her hands to her face and cried. How Sae could go from one personality to another in a *second* didn’t make any sense. She briefly wondered if it had something to do with her having that weird palace place. It could have been the birth of the change in her personality, the same change she sensed months ago. But one thing she knew for a fact was that her daughter was still there, buried under stress and dormant jealousy and hatred.

Maybe with the elimination of this palace, Sae would come back to her just as Akihiko had.

Chapter 117

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For the first time in a *long* time, Makoto was not looking forward to going home.

It had been an interesting day for sure. It all started when *Ren* had been up before her with breakfast already made and on the table. He was tired, she could tell from the way he moved around the apartment. He had panicked when he saw her, apologizing for rummaging through her family's things without permission. She found it cute that he was so worried, since he made breakfast for *everyone* , but it made him seem more *normal* than upset, and she welcomed the change.

When her dad joined them, he had reminded them to act normal, come straight home, then threw her for a loop that got her to wake up fully.

He told her he was going to be in the hospital that day, undergoing surgery on his knee, because he wasn't going to let them all fight alone. It was a feeling of relief, joy, and pride that made her break down and cry (a little) as she told her dad over and over how much it meant to her. He wasn't going to back down for their sake, so she had to keep fighting for her own, and for her friends as well.

Ren had been oddly quiet on the way to school, but he had given her a smile before they parted ways. She hadn't heard anything from him all day, but in between the nasty rumors flooding the halls and her own personal thoughts, she might not have noticed.

In fact, all of her friends had been quiet. No one was talking in the chat. Even during lunch. Makoto wanted to reach out to Haru, who had been absent that day, but she didn't know what to say. She didn't want to annoy her new friend, since she was likely being hounded by a million other people, but Makoto didn't want her to think she wasn't concerned. So before the lunch break was over, she rushed to say *something* .

It was a simple message. *Please let me know if there's anything I can do for you* .

Right as the last bell rang, her phone vibrated in her hand. She held her breath, seeing the message was from Haru, and opened it up to read. *Thank you for your kindness. I'm a little busy and can't leave the house right now, but I can meet with you all after school tomorrow!*

Makoto knew Haru wouldn't run to the police and expose them, even if a small part of her heart worried that was what had happened. However, if that had been true, they would all have been arrested by now. And so far, no one had shown up at the school looking for them.

I will let everyone know.

She had no idea how long she sat staring back at her phone. She was in a daze, but uncharacteristically, she didn't want to get up and do anything. While she trusted Mitsuru and her parents and their old friends, what if Makoto couldn't convince them of their innocence? What if they *weren't* innocent? Just because they knew they didn't kill Okumura didn't mean that the circumstances they brought on him would have kept him *alive* .

But her dad wouldn't have offered to help Ren unless he *knew* he was innocent.

A poke to her forehead was what finally got her to realize where she was. "Looks like someone is tired."

Makoto lifted her eyes to find a smile on Ren's face, despite being able to tell if it was genuine or not. He looked just as tired as she felt. "S-Sorry…" She gathered her things and pushed herself out of the seat, never once meeting Ren's eyes. "I guess we should head back…"

"You seem worried." She took a step towards him, but he didn't move to start walking out of the room. "I know it might be strange to hear, but I think you were right last night. We will find a way out of this. Together."

His tone was missing that confidence that made him uniquely *him* , but she tried not to let him know. “Right…”

Ren slowly turned towards the door and she started to follow after him. He was quiet as they left the school, as they boarded the train, and even as they walked towards their transfer. She noticed him on his phone a bit, likely responding to individual texts from their friends and his friends, but Makoto didn’t have the heart to ask him about any of them.

The walk from the station to her apartment building felt like hours. It was cloudy. It was a little chilly. It was too quiet. The air felt dense and threatened to suffocate her. All the while Ren was being distant and quiet and nervous and scared…

But he caught her off guard. A tug on her arm twisted her back around, but he caught her by her shoulders before she toppled over. She couldn’t describe the look in his eyes, but before she could even ask him if he was really okay, he guided her head towards his and kissed her. She tensed at first, clearly not expecting it, still not used to it, and worried she was doing something wrong. Yet he never let her go, and she didn’t back away from him. It was odd, having her mind literally go blank when it should have been analyzing *why* this kind of intimate affection was acceptable in public.

Ren was the one to break away first, but the smile he shared with her made her mind go numb again. “I have to say, that’s one hell of a remedy for all my problems.”

She could feel her face darkening as he lowered his hand from the base of her neck to her hand. “U-Um…y-yes…it is.”

“So no matter what happens, no matter who our enemies are or their motives, I know we will get through it if you’re with me.”

He sounded much more like the leader she had looked up to for months now, yet she felt that determination in herself, too. Because they weren’t alone. By the end of the day, everyone who could help them would be on the same page. Together, they would all unravel this mess and bring the right people to justice.

She would consider this her second big case to work, and she was determined to see it through.

Makoto was the one to lead Ren inside, sensing his hesitation when he stopped at the door. To her disappointment, no one was home when they entered, but she figured her dad was going to be at the hospital for a while and Mitsuru wouldn't want to talk to just the two of them.

But still, being in a house alone with Ren was a little intimidating. Not that she didn't trust him, but she didn't really know if she trusted herself. Emotions were high. Things were tense. And her mother's words from before she left for Hawaii rang through her mind.

"You two might be the smartest people in the world, but one moment is all it takes."

That and Ren had openly admitted to her that he thought about… *it* …

And now she was, and it terrified her.

"I'm not going to hurt you."

Ren at least had a smile and a playful tone, but that was when she noticed how tense she was. Now she was embarrassed. "I-I know! I'm sorry…"

He patted the seat on the couch next to where he sat and she was quick to fall into it. He chuckled at her, making her face warm again, then kissed the side of her head. "I told everyone what was happening. They wanted to have a meeting at Leblanc, but I told them we could meet tomorrow to talk about our next plan. Which we don't have to decide on tonight."

The only thing she could do was nod in response, suddenly feeling that dread sink back into her heart. "H-Haru wants to come, too…" She felt Ren tense next to her, so she added, "I want her to tell her story to Mitsuru, since we know very little about her father or who may have targeted him under our name."

Morgana popped his head out from Ren's bag, then moved to sit on

Ren's lap. "Do you think that guy with the black mask did this?"

Did he? It was hard to know for sure. While it would be nice to point the finger, she didn't even know who he was. Maybe her dad and Mitsuru did? Maybe they could figure it out together?

"It seems likely, but my biggest concern is why he followed after us and why Okumura was the only one he killed." The gears in her head started to move a little too fast for her. Why was it that Okumura was targeted and no one else prior? Did the black mask guy know him, or did he attack him to throw her friends under the bus? And if so, why? Because they were popular? Because they didn't seem eager to stop? And if that was the case, who knew them well enough to know they *wouldn't?* The calling card wasn't public knowledge, and she was pretty sure the fan-site only advertised they were going after Okumura. No one would know anything about a deadline…

Did the guy with the black mask know them? It was hard to think that the guy just walked into Okumura's palace right after they left just because. Hadn't Okumura been about to confess to something more than his inhumane treatment of his staff? Who was he about to rat out?

"Don't think too hard." Ren poked her again, followed by a laugh when she made a face, but then he leaned back and looked around the room. "I can't really say I know your family all that well, but this place is exactly what I pictured. Everything has a place. Everything is well-kept. Everything kind of matches. It's nice."

It wasn't anything special, she thought, but it was home. A place she had grown up in with so many memories, good and bad, and she suddenly felt pity for Ren. He had been sentenced away from his home, to a small attic space, then pulled out of there to stay with her family for a few days. To be constantly out of his comfort space and still act like he was perfectly fine…

She shook her head, unable to voice her thought, but Ren wrapped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her into him. "I should be extremely nervous right now, but I'm oddly calm here, sitting next to you."

A small smile formed on her face, knowing he had spoken the words that emphasized her feelings as well. “I’m sure that will change when my father comes home.”

Ren’s body shook with a quiet laugh, but it helped her relax even more. She felt like she could fall asleep. “I’d like to think I can handle him myself, but…I’m clearly lying.”

She felt his fingers play with the fringes of her hair, and she could have sworn he was coaxing her to sleep. It was really early, and she was never one for naps, but she had slept terribly the night before. A few minutes to catch up on sleep before their unavoidable meeting might keep her mind sharp and focused.

When she opened her eyes a few minutes later, Makoto knew it wasn’t a *few* minutes later. The lights were on. It was getting dark outside. And she was not alone.

Her mother sat across from her with a smile so devious that it immediately made Makoto sit up straight in her seat. She laughed at her, but when Makoto heard grumbling next to her, her heart sank with the realization that Ren had *also* fallen asleep and she had woke him up.

“That’s not nice, waking your *boyfriend* like that.”

The heat that spread across her face would have woken Ren up if she didn’t stir him awake first. Ren found the situation amusing as well, making her face burn more, and dropped his arm back over her shoulders.

“She makes a comfortable pillow.”

Her hands covered her face while her mom beamed at him.

“And *you’ll* make a good punching bag.”

Makoto froze hearing her dad’s voice, even if it wasn’t as menacing as it could have been. Her hands dropped from her face, eager to know if he was okay, and caught him entering the room from the hallway, Mitsuru right behind him. He looked tired, supported his weight on two crutches, and her mom helped him to sit in the seat

next to her. His knee was heavily wrapped up, he grimaced as he sat down, but it did so much to her heart knowing he was home and healthy and still able to strike fear into her.

And Ren, too, because he wisely chose to keep his mouth shut.

“You’re okay!”

She would have gotten up and given him a hug, but he looked like he was in a fair amount of pain, and he was home pretty early for someone who had surgery that morning. Or she had really lost track of time with her nap.

Makoto smiled in relief when he leaned back after a nod of his head. “Yeah, I’m fine. Just really need to stay off of it so it heals.”

“We’re taking bets to see how long he actually follows his doctor’s orders,” came her mom’s playful tone. “I’m saying two days. Mitsuru says a week.”

Her dad groaned out a sigh. “I plan on staying off of it for at least two weeks. I sure as hell don’t want to do that again.”

It warmed her immensely to see this level of happiness from both her dad and her mom. It meant they were fighting, and in a time where Makoto had little hope for anything to go right, they set that example. After being put through hell, her dad was able to come out of it, ready to help them in their quest for justice and answers. Even if it was hard, even if he didn’t want to do it, he was. Because it was *right* .

Ren must have felt much the same, for he retracted his arm (she was kind of sad about it), stood up in front of her, and bowed to the three adults in the room. “I seriously can’t thank you enough for what you have done. So I hope that we can work together to figure out what’s happening. Anything you want to ask me, I will be as helpful as I can.”

Morgana chose to jump off the couch and land beside his feet. “I can help you all, too! I’m the one who helped Ren understand what the Metaverse was! Even if I don’t know everything…”

Mitsuru's eyes roamed around the room. "Is your… *cat* …speaking?"

Makoto would have laughed had it been anyone other than Mitsuru. "Whenever someone enters the Metaverse, you can understand him. I know it doesn't make sense, but, neither does a lot of things."

Her answer didn't fully satisfy Mitsuru, but the older woman took a seat in a chair she had pulled up from the table. Ren took his seat again as well, then took a deep breath. Makoto wanted to hold his hand, to tell him it was okay, given this was *her* family and not his, but she didn't think it was appropriate. She would later.

"First of all," Mitsuru began, leaning forward in her seat. "Nothing you reveal to me will be made public or taken to the proper authorities. Your trust is something I will not take for granted. And as such, I would like to ask the same of you."

When Ren nodded his head, she continued. "When I was young, my family was responsible for these supernatural beasts called shadows. In an effort to hide that fact, myself, as well as my friends, were charged with eliminating them. Over the years, I met those with the power to wield personas, and we all formed a group to destroy what we called the Dark Hour. Every hour at midnight, time stopped for those without some form of resonance, and for an hour, shadows ran rampant in our town. Long story short, we managed to stop the inevitable destruction, but many details after the finale are still unknown."

It was strange to hear all of this again, but Ren seemed to be taking it all rather well.

"Over the next several years, many other occurrences of humans fighting in a supernatural world were investigated, all being linked to the same man that had betrayed our trust when we were in high school. But each world was different. However, other than a random shadow appearing over time, nothing impressive had been reported to me for years. Until recently."

She could feel Ren's hands clench at his side. She also noted he was breathing heavier. "I would like you to start from the beginning. From when you met your persona and until it leads you here before

us. Makoto has given us some simple basics, but I'd like to hear your version of the story."

Ren took a deep breath before answering. "I was transferred here to serve out a probation sentence. When I was walking around Shibuya looking for my next line, the world kind of came to a stop and I saw this blue flame emerge out of nowhere. I had no idea what it was at the time, but once it faded, I saw a weird app on my phone. I thought nothing of it, until I was walking to school with Ryuji the next day and came upon a castle instead of a school."

"This castle, was it a palace?" Mitsuru asked.

"Yeah." Ren lifted a hand to his head, and Makoto worried he was feeling dizzy or trapped. But he pushed on. "I don't even know how I got there. I know now I must have had the app open that warps us to the Metaverse, but I didn't do it on purpose. That was Kamoshida's palace."

She noticed how her dad cringed at the name, but he never spoke up.

"I had no idea what I had walked into, but Kamoshida appeared and his shadow army captured me and Ryuji and locked us up. When Kamoshida had his hands around Ryuji's neck, I felt something snap in me. I heard a voice, asking if I regretted my actions that sent me to Tokyo, then all the sudden, I have a power. That was how we escaped."

"How did you call it out? Instinct alone?"

"I mean, I guess. I just touch my mask and call a name and they're there…"

Morgana took that moment to clear things up. "I don't know how your family and friends summoned their personas, but everyone I know summons them as a way to channel their true self. We all have outfits that symbolize our rebellion against the shell we show ourselves as in the outside world. I don't understand *how* that works, but I know that's *why* it happens."

Her dad seemed to understand to some degree. “So that was why you had that strange getup when we went to that weird place.”

Mitsuru was quick to ask, “Then why didn’t anything change with us when we entered Sae’s palace?”

Morgana dropped to sit on his hind legs. “Well, since you already have a persona, maybe it won’t with you? Or, she didn’t see you as a threat, would be my guess. Those who are extremely arrogant also don’t see us as a threat when we first enter. Until we make a little noise.”

Hearing Morgana indirectly call her sister *arrogant* did not go unnoticed by her dad. He again chose to remain quiet about it.

Mitsuru didn’t comment on it either. “So how did you manage to subdue a man like Kamoshida with no clue as to what you were doing and without drawing suspicion?”

While Makoto knew about the method to change a heart, it was also the first time she was hearing about Kamoshida’s change from Ren. “Morgana led us at first. Basically, we have to reach a treasure room, where the palace owner holds the object that twisted their desires to birth a palace, or something like that. Then we issue a calling card, a warning, letting him know they aren’t as safe as their ego tells them they are. The day after the calling card is delivered, we steal that object, which leads us to fight their shadow, and the palace comes crumbling down. From there, it’s only a matter of time before they confess and become remorseful.”

The older woman across from her nodded as if she was understanding. Makoto found that impressive. Even with her background. “So you walked into Kamoshida’s palace without understanding, then made him your first target. Then why go after the others?”

Ren took another breath. “A stalker turned friend allowed us to visit his mentor’s exhibit show. Madarame. It took some time to break through the trust he had for him, but when we learned of the abuse, we had to help. When we learned he had a palace, we knew how to do that.”

“So you find those who are in trouble and find out if their abuser has a palace?”

“Kind of.”

“I can assume your story of Kamoshida’s palace holds true for Madarame and Kaneshiro.” Makoto felt eyes on her as she tried to blend into the couch. Thankfully, Kaneshiro wasn’t a case that Mitsuru needed explained in more detail. “Then what happened with Medjed?”

Hearing that, Ren also leaned back into his seat. “I have no idea. Medjed wasn’t actually our target. But as I’m sure you know, someone else was and she was the one who promised to help if we changed her heart.”

Mitsuru exchanged a look with her dad, then turned her eyes back towards Ren. “Then what went south with Okumura?”

His shoulders dropped with a sigh, but Makoto finally forced words out of her mouth. “We didn’t kill him. We did what we have always done in the past. I swear it.”

“We believe we were followed by the guy with the black mask!”

Morgana’s statement brought a deafening silence to the room. Her dad had been quiet so far, but hearing this, he was quick to sit up and join the conversation. “What?”

Ren added, “We don’t know for sure. He’s just been named by two of the previous targets as being in the Metaverse, and that eliminating a shadow was how he killed people.”

Before Mitsuru or her dad could ask another question, Makoto rose to her feet to silence them. “We wanted to help his daughter, Haru. He was going to ship her off to marry a bad guy against her will just to gain clout in the political world. But we first heard about him from the website our friend runs, so the public wanted Okumura to change as well.”

Her comment looked like it took Mitsuru by surprise. She gave her dad a look, but neither of them voiced their concern or whatever it

was they were hiding.

Ren picked up on it as well. “Something wrong?”

“We don’t know,” her dad said a few seconds later. “Having been out of commission for several weeks, I know little about Okumura. But… this isn’t the first case where someone died like that before confessing about a scandal.”

Makoto and Ren both waited for him to continue on. But he didn’t. Her mind started to run wild again. Who was the first person to die then? Were both cases related? And was it really at the hands of the black mask guy? It had to be. Unless there was a group of people Makoto and her friends didn’t know about wielding personas and…

Was that why this culprit had tried to kill her father? Because he was going to start making waves where no one wanted them?

…Was that why he was *kidnapped* and likely *threatened* to keep quiet, since the assassination failed?

“We were questioning a man about the hit placed over Akihiko and his family when he died in the back of my car.” It was the first time in her life she had heard Mitsuru speak so timidly. “He was not acting alone. He had admitted to us that much. And now I fear he was a simple pawn, used for a singular purpose, then murdered before he could talk.”

It all came back to her.

That was when Sae arrested him after she had returned home from Hawaii.

And now Ren was in that exact same position.

“Do you know anyone else who can use these powers?”

Mitsuru’s question made her think, made Ren think, but Morgana only shook his head. “Besides our group and yours, Akechi seems to be the only one who can understand me. So far.”

She suddenly felt sick to her stomach.

The face Mitsuru and her dad made at the statement…did they think *Akechi* was the guy in black? But why would Akechi try and kill her dad, or kill at all? He sure as hell didn't strike her as the kind of person who would follow someone's orders. Maybe there was more than one guy with a black mask with the power to wield a persona? Did he have to wield a persona to *kill?*

Then she was reminded of their recent encounter. How he claimed to know she was a Phantom Thief. How she needed to turn herself in. How he knew both of her parents. He *had* been oddly curious about her father after they had defeated his shadow. Had that been him trying to gather intel to plan another attempt?

But *why?*

Ren finally broke through the tension. "Do you…do you think *Akechi* is the guy with the black mask?"

She waited for someone to answer him.

And she waited…

…And she waited…

She thought she was going to suffocate or break her hands.

Until her dad's voice echoed in the silence. "We can't say with certainty, or link him with any real motive, but…" He exhaled deeply. "This can't be a coincidence. And in my field of work, there's no such thing as a coincidence."

Makoto felt the weight of the world crush her in half. Her dad was *not* one to speculate, and if so, he never voiced it until he had enough proof to back it up. So she knew he was telling the truth. And at the same time, naming Akechi as the guy with the black mask would make some of her own questions find answers.

All that supposed idle chit chat.

His comments about her sister.

His curiosity about her dad.

His interest in the Phantom Thieves.

It hadn't been for nothing. He was gathering information. And he had just found a way to use it all against them.

"Until we can establish a motive, please keep this between us," Mitsuru added. "We could be mistaken. There are still so many unanswered questions about this power. We would like him to move about freely until we can prove if he's innocent or not."

"And even if we're right, he's still not the one calling the shots." Her dad looked frustrated, like he was so close to understanding something, but missing that *one* piece. It was still nice to see him actively thinking instead of hiding though. "He's likely being manipulated, or even threatened, so if you hear anything, let us know."

Beside her, Ren nodded his head. The room grew silent once again. She was more than willing to have the peace to let her mind absorb the information that was shared. Akechi being their enemy was a bombshell she hadn't been mentally prepared for.

"I'd like to ask you one more thing, Amamiya."

Makoto looked over to her dad, then back to Ren. "Um. Okay?"

"I want to know how you were charged with assault."

Chapter 118

Chapter 118

Akihiko was far too wired to even *think* about sleep.

Listening to Amamiya's story about how he had been labeled a criminal was supposed to answer his questions, not create more of them. Amamiya had never once named the man he had pulled off the woman he saved. He couldn't even provide a description. He even said that every time he thought about who the man was, he got a ringing headache, like his subconscious didn't want him to remember.

It was all incredibly odd.

Akihiko knew he could track down the woman that had supposedly turned on Amamiya, but that could take months, if she decided to speak at all. Amamiya did say she likely felt threatened, since her attacker seemed like a threatening guy, so she might have been forced to lie. Even if he did manage to find her, she would probably be too intimidated to tell him the truth, or could easily hold up her lie and tell him off.

But it was one line Amamiya said that shook him to his core.

"He said something about owning the police, or them being his servants, which was when I remember thinking I was in more trouble than I thought…"

It sounded a lot like another claim he had heard only weeks before.

"I am *the police. They serve* me."

Shido had told him that while he had been in the back of his car. But how the hell would Shido have been in Amamiya's hometown, drunk, and in the middle of committing a crime?

Not that Akihiko could say Shido wouldn't be the type to *kidnap*

someone…

But not only that, Fuuka had spent hours looking at the report and found nothing about the person who had pressed charges. It was pretty much an open and shut case, literally. There was no evidence. The cops arrested Amamiya and that was that. Fuuka herself had even told him way back then that whoever the accuser didn't want people to know they were involved, which meant he had power, or powerful friends.

A dirty politician with the public's support would have many questions to answer if they knew he was involved in a juvenile assault case, drunk, and harassing a young woman. Amamiya could have named him to the press had they asked him his side of the story. It would have been better to remain anonymous, threaten the only witness, and ruin a good Samaritan's future.

And basically tell his *servants* to do their job…

It was a stretch, but it was one he couldn't disprove. He knew looking into Shido's whereabouts during that time would be a red flag to the wrong people, but that was the only way to know for sure. But he knew Shido was a ghost. If and when he left a trail, someone would clean up after him. And those that figured it out and saw the trail before it could get scrubbed out of existence, they were killed.

Ohya would be his best bet for information if Fuuka couldn't find anything. If she could find a folder from Murakami, or if he could find the information his partner had left behind, maybe he could find out on his own. It was a dangerous game, knowing exactly what would happen if someone *saw* him, and Amamiya had already made peace with his conviction…

It was annoying, knowing Shido was a horrible human being, but not having enough physical proof to take him down.

Aside from Amamiya, Akihiko was also curious to know Shido's relationship with Akechi. Shido openly admitted to sending someone into the strange world to kill people, which fit the description of the guy with the black mask. He didn't know when Akechi would have started his hitman role, if it was recent, if he was replacing someone

after the first one left (or was killed), or if he was the only one. It was hard to fathom a young child *murdering* just because someone told him to, but Akihiko had a pretty good idea of how intimidating Shido could be.

He just got hung up with why Akechi seemed to *enjoy* it. Perhaps he had been threatened initially, then all the destruction grew on him. Maybe Shido was giving him purpose in a life that he wasn't happy about. Teenagers were very malleable creatures, and the possible psychological damage could have been endless.

"Can I tell you something?"

Akihiko jerked on his spot on the bed, never expecting Minako to still be awake this late in the night. But her question made him worry. "Um, why aren't you sleeping?"

She rolled over, but the look on her face solidified his concern. She had been acting much more reserved after she saw him again after his successful surgery. She had barely spoken to him on the drive home. At the time, he assumed she was being quiet so not to agitate him, but now it became something else.

He waited for what felt like days for her to speak back up. "Do you think…do you…do you think if they changed Sae, that she would come back to us again?"

It took her a few minutes to actually ask her question, but when the reality of what she had asked sank in, he panicked. "W-Why would you think that?"

In all honesty, Akihiko figured that could be true, but he sure as hell wasn't going to have the heart to challenge Sae's shadow and her dormant rage a second time. Makoto could have been killed trying to protect him from her some months ago. And now with the black mask figure running in behind the Phantom Thieves after they labeled a target, the *last* thing he wanted was for them to help Sae now.

Especially if he was right about Akechi.

“I know you worry about her,” Minako said softly, almost to the point he didn’t hear her. “But I saw her today, at the hospital, and she’s *still* in there somewhere. What if this is the only way to help her?”

Akihiko choked on his breath. “Y-You saw her?”

He watched as Minako slowly sat up in the bed. “She knew I was at the hospital waiting for you, but I don’t know how. She told me that she’s tired of everything. No answers. No truth. And people are starting to grow upset with her because of it. And at that moment, I *saw* her, our daughter, and I can’t just ignore it.”

She placed a hand on his chest when he tried to sit up next to her. “We have to save her, Aki. Even if we’re scared of what will happen. Even if it’s hard. Because the only way we can show her how much we truly love her is to fight her.”

“Do you have any idea what you’re saying?” He fought against her when she tried to keep him down. His eyes narrowed at her when he was sitting up and comfortable. “I couldn’t do anything the last time we went in. And now, someone is *dead* . Yet you want me to go back in and do the same thing and cross my fingers Akechi doesn’t kill her, too?”

Minako chose to keep her reply to herself for the longest time. He watched her open her mouth to say something, close it, then finally power through. “How do you know that he isn’t already going after her? How do you know that she’s safe in our world right now? If there’s even the smallest chance for a happy future for her, would you give it to her, or would you just let her be miserable?”

It was slightly annoying that she was making sense while ignoring the grave danger they would put Sae in at the same time. But she was right. How did he know she was safe at that very moment in time? And how many other times had she been in danger and she found her way out of it? Sae worked with Akechi on practically everything, so if he was acting strange, Sae would know.

His biggest fear was that she wouldn’t *tell* anyone because she didn’t think she *had* anyone.

“Will you at least talk with her?”

Akihiko snapped back to attention when Minako’s hand landed on his arm. “What?”

Her eyes dropped to the space between them. “She thinks she has no one to talk to about her cases and her troubles involving them. You’ve been secretive and quiet about all your cases. Maybe the two of you should sit down and find your answers together.”

A weak laugh escaped his lips. “Yeah, she’s never going to agree to meet with me for a chat and coffee.”

“I’ll see to it she does.”

Her confidence left him puzzled, but Minako only smiled and dropped back down on the bed. The roller coaster of emotions left him extremely exhausted, so he also laid back down on the bed to hopefully get some sleep.

The long day, the information from their talk, Amamiya’s past, and now Sae’s safety should have kept him wide awake all night. But thanks to his surgery and Minako’s incessant demands for him to take his medication, he was able to get some amount of sleep. He was groggy as all hell when he woke up some hours later, more so when he noticed Minako was already up, but he also knew he had a lot of work to do.

When he managed to stumble around to the kitchen, Minako wore a smile and had a perfectly prepared breakfast waiting for him. Her smile alone turned his fatigue into energy, and the food would physically do that for him.

But then she wrapped up the plate and put it away. “W-What are you doing?”

Her smile turned more devious and he swore his face darkened. “What? You can’t make your own breakfast?”

Was she serious? Had he upset her the night before? But she was very playful right now… “Um, I mean…I guess I could…”

She laughed at him. “You remember how last night I told you I would arrange a meeting with you and Sae?”

His heart skipped a beat.

“She likes coffee. You like coffee. And I need some fresh air. I didn’t tell her I was bringing you along, but, she can suck it up.”

He shook his head. “You do realize that the minute she sees me, she’s going to take off.”

Her eyes told him otherwise. What the hell did she know that he didn’t? “Go get ready. I know the perfect place to take you.”

It was all too sudden, and confusing. He couldn’t understand how Minako managed to convince Sae to meet with her. All for coffee? Free coffee? Or had Sae perhaps reconnected with Minako at the hospital and now she wanted to get more off her chest? Or was Sae trying to bait Minako into revealing information about the Phantom Thieves and now Okumura’s death?

Or was Minako pulling his chain and she just wanted the fresh air?

He also didn’t know where Minako planned on taking him. The “perfect place” would have been their home. Away from prying eyes and nosy ears. He sure as hell couldn’t look at a person around him and label them as Shido’s henchmen, and if he really wanted to talk about him with Sae, he had to do so discreetly. Assuming of course, Sae actually met with him and she spoke to him and her cases were similar to his.

After what felt like hours fighting with his mind and his doubts and his damn knee so he could change, Minako met him in the hallway with another overly happy smile. She reached out and straightened his collar, even though he was sure it was fine, then proceeded to unfasten and refasten each of the buttons on his shirt like he had missed one. When he grabbed her wrist, she giggled at him.

“You know, I always think you’re super cute no matter what season it is, but you always look the best in fall.” He met her eyes while trying to keep the blush off his face. “I’ve always loved how you can

make everything look so formal, like you're serious about everything and giving everything your best."

What was happening? "Um. Are you okay?"

She leaned into him, resting her head against his chest. "I'm just so happy you're back." She pulled away from him, then offered him a more genuine smile. "And I know we can bring our daughter back."

The kiss that followed was brief, sadly, but it instilled in him his desire to help. If Sae was working on the Phantom Thief case, maybe she had more information that he didn't know about. Or the mental shutdowns. Maybe she had her eyes on Akechi for the same reasons, and that was why she allowed him to work with her. Keeping the enemy close…

The quicker he got her to trust him again, even over work related issues, the quicker he could *help* .

Neither of them spoke as Akihiko followed behind Minako to the station. She turned at one point before they entered, asked him if he was okay, to which he only replied, "If you can magically make it so I don't have to use crutches right now, then no. But I'll be fine."

He was irritated enough with hobbling around everywhere that he forgot to ask Minako where they were going.

But when they passed through the gate to head to a connection out of the city, Akihiko grabbed Minako's arm and stopped her. "Where are we going?"

It was the same route to get to Yongen-Jaya. Any other time, he would have been overjoyed. But Sae and Sojiro did *not* get along. He didn't feel comfortable bringing Sae to a place where she could grill an innocent man to learn more about her cases. Even if Sojiro likely *did* know more than he was telling, as Futaba had confirmed that her mother knew about the Metaverse, it didn't mean Sae could threaten him for that kind of information.

Maybe in a calm way, he could convince Sojiro to be more open with Sae. Or he could tell her himself. But again, it was *what* Sae was

going to do with the information that left him hiding it in the first place.

“I want you to talk to her, Aki.”

He released her arm only because he had to balance himself as more people passed them. “Minako, I’m happy you want to take me out to that shop, but Sae is out for Sakura-san’s blood. If he knows she’s going to be there, she’s going to make a scene or he’s going to kick us out.”

She waved his concern off. “Have more faith in her.”

“And maybe you have too much faith in her.”

He regretted his word choice when she glared at him. “She’s our daughter.”

But Minako needed to understand. “How would you feel if a stranger came up to you and threatened to take Makoto away from us if we didn’t give them information that we may or may not know about Amamiya?”

His words did their job. Minako sighed in defeat, which made him feel *terrible* . “I don’t want her to talk to *him* . I want her to talk to *you* .”

“Did you tell her to meet you there?”

When Minako didn’t respond, he reached out for her arm again. “We’ll go. But I need to warn Sakura-san that she’s coming. And if she tries to cause trouble, we have to leave. Alright?”

It killed him to see much of her earlier excitement gone, and she didn’t say another word to him as she turned to head towards the subway. It took him a second or two to catch up to her, but he unfortunately didn’t know what to say to her to bring her smile back.

Before the train arrived, Minako looked over her shoulder and met his eyes. “I’m sorry.”

He took a step towards her, balanced himself again, then reached

for her hand. “I didn’t mean to sound so callous. I just wanted you to be aware of the situation.”

All she did was nod in understanding, her smile never returning, and the train ride was done in painful silence. His mind ran away with him again, from how Sae would react to his presence, to if she showed up at all, to *why* she would have agreed to meet in the first place.

But there was a small amount of hope. If Sae really did sit down and talk to him, not only could they both find answers they had been missing all along, but he could connect with her again. Hopefully.

His mind continued to race with a million thoughts and emotions until Minako opened the door to the café and the bell went off above their heads. The first thing he noticed was that it was empty inside, a good thing, and the barista seemed either annoyed or happy to see them both again.

It was then that he felt a sinking feeling.

He never told Sojiro that Amamiya was staying with him. What if he panicked? Or called the cops? Did Sae know Amamiya was staying with them? Was that something Sae had asked Minako?

“Ah, it’s good to see you both again.”

Sojiro seemed fairly calm. Maybe he didn’t know?

“I guess I should thank you for giving that boy a place to stay after what happened.”

He *did* know? How?

“It’s not easy being alone after watching something that horrific.” He saw Minako from the corner of his eyes walk towards a nearby booth and signal for him to sit down. “It’s had an effect on everyone.”

In a haze, Akihiko followed her silent advice and carefully sat down in the booth she had chosen. Had *she* spoken to Sojiro already? When? Or had Amamiya given him the heads up? Either way, Sojiro didn’t seem too bothered by it, more like he was grateful.

Then Minako's voice broke through the silence again. "I do come bearing some bad news, I guess."

He heard Sojiro snicker. "Tired of dealing with an injured man, I take it."

Akihiko kept his retort to himself.

"I…I'm supposed to meet my daughter here…" He felt his heart leap into his throat. "And I'm under the impression she doesn't like you."

If anything, Minako shouldn't have to bear that burden on her own. He shifted in his seat, but never made eye contact with Sojiro. "I highly doubt she will even come, but I promise you, this isn't about you. And if it becomes about that, we will leave."

He caught Minako bowing to him. "I'm really sorry. I wanted him to get out of the house and he loves it here and my daughter had said something to me that worried me the other day. So I figured it was safe here for them to talk."

Sojiro himself was quiet, almost *too* quiet. When Akihiko managed to look over at him, he had just finished lighting a fresh cigarette. "Can't say I'm thrilled, but I'd like to think I can trust you both." Then, the other man's eyes met his. "Futaba speaks very highly of you. And she doesn't care for most adults anymore."

The moment was interrupted when the bell signaled a new customer. Reading the expressions of Sojiro and Minako, Akihiko tried to make himself as small as possible. Why was speaking to Sae always so *hard?*

The silence that followed could have killed him. Minako moved towards the door and very uncharacteristically, grabbed Sae's arm and pulled her next to the booth he was sitting at. Then, she literally shoved her into the seat across from him and sat down herself, blocking her only way out.

"I'm tired of this. Both of you are going to talk today, or so help me god we will be here all damn night." Akihiko felt like a child all of the sudden, being scolded by the orphanage director when he got into

trouble with Shinji. His only comfort had been that Sae looked annoyed at being tricked and treated like a child.

“I recall you saying this would be quick and over coffee.”

Minako beamed at Sae, then reached over to grab his hand. “Oh. It will be.”

The next second, Minako lifted Sae’s arm, slapped a handcuff on her wrist, then cuffed the other to his before he could blink. Then, she slid out of the booth with a smile so bright it made the lights look dim and fading. “I’ll be back with some coffee, don’t worry.”

He gave her credit. She planned this out perfectly. The only problem was that Sae was *seething* across from him and Minako had walked away. If anything, he was now worried Sae would yank on his arm so hard he would lose it.

“I had no idea this was going to happen,” he told her. “I swear.”

Sae ignored him with a scowl growing on her face. Akihiko had no idea what to say. A part of him was still reeling at Minako’s plan and how perfectly she pulled it off. The other part of him was nervous, waiting for Sae to snap and drag him off somewhere and call for backup.

But when Minako dropped their coffee in front of them and walked back to the bar to sit, Akihiko figured she wasn’t going to be the middleman he expected her to be. Sae was his daughter, and he needed to stop feeling scared around her when Minako made it seem like she was in trouble. Maybe with the forceful treatment of her mother, Sae would be more willing to talk.

Now he just had to hope for the best and that this was the moment he had been waiting for.

Chapter 119

Chapter 119

“So. H-How is work?”

Sae wanted to jerk her arm back towards her, which would make Akihiko’s stomach collide into the table, but then the coffee would spill on her and she wasn’t about to get any *more* agitated. She instead remained silent, trying to think of something even more elaborate than her own *mother’s* plan to trap her across the table from the last person she wanted to talk to.

She should have known “coffee and information” wouldn’t have been what she thought. Sae just never thought Minako would ever be so *devious* .

Her silence seemed to frustrate him at least, which made her feel powerful. He took a deep breath and exhaled loudly. “Look, Sae, I know you don’t want to talk to me, but you told your mother that you were tired of not having the answers. So if you talk to me, I can help you.”

Her eyes narrowed. Did he seriously just say that out loud? “I can’t find my answers because *someone* keeps hiding them.”

He sighed again, more as a sign of defeat. “Yeah, I do hide things from you, because you’re going to run away with it without understanding.”

“So you admit that you’re *lying* to protect someone, or yourself, even though they are *criminals?”*

Without skipping a beat, he completely evaded her question with one of his own. “How well do you know Goro Akechi?”

It took her by surprise and caught her off guard. Why was he asking? Did he think Akechi had something to do with the Phantom Thieves? Was Akechi a Phantom Thief? Or was he trying to shove

blame on to someone else?

Not that Akihiko was the type to *lie* , but she couldn't rule it out. "Why are you asking?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "He's close to you."

Sae scoffed at that. "He's not close with me. He annoys me."

There was an odd smile on his face the next second. "It seems we both agree on something."

She wanted to slap it off of his face. "What is this about? Don't beat around the bush with me."

"Fair enough." The smile was gone at least, but he didn't continue on like she expected. Instead, he seemed to be stalling, or thinking of a grand story to tell her to deflect suspicion. He even shot a glance over to where Minako and Sakura were sitting at the bar close by.

"Stop that." She pulled on the wrist she was handcuffed to. He was stalling. She knew that now. She just didn't know why. "Why are you asking about Akechi?"

Another long and agonizing second ticked away.

Finally, "I think he's behind your mental shutdowns."

The admission struck her like lightning. How the hell did Akihiko think Akechi was a *murderer?* How the hell did Akechi create the shutdowns in the first place? And how the hell would Akihiko *know* how that would be possible if he was going to implicate the teen?

"If you want to run and tell the police my story, then be my guest. Because you're right. I've been hiding a lot from you since day one. But I want you to know that I've done all of this to protect you and your sister. I never wanted either of you to be caught up in any of this. But I would rather you *know* than be ignorant and have you fall into a trap."

For the first time in her life, Sae waited with eager ears for him to

continue on. Akihiko was not a good liar, and even in the past, if he didn't tell the truth, he simply said nothing. It made her that much more curious to know what he was going to finally tell her.

"I have a strange power. That was how I came to work with Mitsuru. I can fight beasts, and sometimes humans, in a supernatural world. I fought in high school with a few others, and we kind of saved people from a serious and long-lasting, incurable depression. But other than a few random occurrences years after I graduated, that had been the only time I used my power. For reasons unknown, much of the same type of power has been passed on to other people. I know most of them now, but there's only one person who has this power who uses it to *kill* . And he tried to kill me months ago. I saw him. I *heard* him."

It wasn't at all what she was expecting to hear, but it intrigued her at the same time. "And you're telling me that you think Akechi was the one who tried to kill you with this power you supposedly have?"

He slowly nodded his head. "I only saw a shadow figure, and at the time, I didn't recognize his voice. But once I did, I tried to look into someone he would have known who may have been pulling the strings in all of this *and* knew how about this world. When I thought I was getting close, I was kidnapped, and the guy I was brought to confirmed all of my suspicions for himself."

That was *not* something she wanted to bring back up, but thankfully, he kept on talking. She was also very confused herself. *A different world?*

"The man who cornered you that night was the same one who shot at me over a year ago when I was stabbed in Shibuya. He knew Kaneshiro, probably even worked with him. He put a bullet in my leg when I went after your sister. He forced me to meet with this powerful man because that's who's sitting at the top. Everything is connected, but yet, he knows how to get to me. He has eyes on you, and your sister, at all times. And now I'm terrified you're so far deep in their conspiracy that I don't know where to start helping you."

Sae shook her head adamantly. "Have you lost your mind? You think I wouldn't know if I'm just a pawn in someone's game?"

Akihiko said nothing, just stared back at her with a look that made her sick to her stomach.

For months, something had been off at the office. Akechi was always annoying, but even something was different with him. With the death of Okumura, a Phantom Thief target, things were getting out of control. Yet no one she worked with seemed to be as horrified as she had been watching the news. In fact, no one had even blamed her for allowing Okumura to die on her watch. It was almost like they didn't care someone was dead…

"I think Akechi killed Okumura, to silence him from opening a can of worms on a corruption scheme I've been digging up. Which is why I think he was sent to try and kill me months ago after I started looking."

No. It didn't make sense. How did Akechi kill someone without *killing* them? Okumura wasn't poisoned, nor was he shot on national TV. He had a heart-attack. Even if the violent manner of death was far from what she thought happened with a heart-attack…

A different world…

Akechi told her to look into Wakaba Isshiki, who knew something about "cognitive psience", which was the link she needed to understand these odd occurrences, possibly this other world…

Had someone been using a power to kill in another world? It didn't make any sense.

"My boss…" Akihiko's voice pulled her back into the conversation. "He died the same way. Right before he was going to tell us who he was working for."

It was all too bizarre for her mind to wrap itself around. But she had no evidence to contradict him. All she could really remember was that was when the brass and the commissioner had him hauled to that interrogation room and beat the hell out of him.

Back then, she had wanted to know about the Phantom Thieves, and knew Akihiko had valuable information. They, however, wanted

revenge, not answers. But Masami was reported to have been beaten to death, according to the examiner.

So, “Did you kill him? And I want you to be honest with me.”

When he met her eyes again, she knew his answer before he said it. “No, I didn’t. I never even touched him.”

Her mind was spinning. “So then why were you speaking to him? Why do the police always assume you’re involved with everything? Who the hell have you pissed off enough that they want to frame you for every little thing they can?”

There was a long and suffocating pause. When she looked back up, she expected him to have a smile and tell her that he was so happy that she was being so open with him (for the moment).

But he didn’t. He frowned deeply, seeming to fight himself for the right words, and a part of her grew cold watching him struggle. “Have you…” He stopped, lifted his free hand to his head, and sighed angrily. “Do you know…ah, never mind.”

It annoyed her. “I told you to stop that.”

He leaned back, inhaled deeply, then released his breath. Seconds turned into minutes. “Masayoshi Shido. Do you know him?”

The fact it took Akihiko over five minutes to ask her made her worry. He was carefully studying her reaction, but honestly, she had only heard about Shido. She told him as much. “I know who he is. He’s running for Prime Minister and the public seems to support him.”

To her dismay, Akihiko didn’t tell her why he had asked. “How did you find out about Wakaba Isshiki?”

That sent her spiraling. “W-What?”

“It was impossible for Mitsuru to find any information on her, yet you know exactly who she is and where to go start your investigation.” His eyes narrowed at her. “How did you find out?”

A small part of her was angry with him for making her out to be the

villain when *he* knew more than what he was telling. “Do you know who the Phantom Thieves are?”

The look on his face didn’t change like she hoped it would have. “I do. But I won’t tell you.”

She sighed angrily. “How do you expect me to be upfront with you when you just admitted to hiding valuable information from me?”

“Because your true objective is *not* to find them, but to find out the truth behind the mental shutdowns.” His tone was sharp, and it unnerved her. “Now, how did you find out about Isshiki?”

“They killed Okumura.”

“How do you know that?”

She really wanted to slap him across the face. “Are you saying I’m wrong?”

But his eyes never left hers like they always did when he was *hiding* . “I’m not saying you’re *right.”*

“They’re *criminals.”*

“They saved your sister. Twice.”

“And now, a man is *dead.”*

“You, and the police, are only so angry with them because they are making us look incompetent. If these criminals would have been tried and locked up like they should have been, the Phantom Thieves wouldn’t exist.”

“And *they* will be tried and brought to justice for their crimes once I catch them.”

“Until you know about this other world, Sae, you can’t prove a damn thing. And when you finally do learn about it, you’ll realize you were wrong the entire time.”

It was extremely strange to have this kind of heated discussion with

him. She was prepared for this kind of back and forth in her mind. She was ready to lash out at him, knew how to press his buttons, and she thought she could get her information easily enough. But here she was, at least twenty minutes later, with not only nothing, but more questions than answers.

“Sae.” She refused to look up at him and kept her eyes on the untouched coffee in front of her. “I want to help you. Please. How did you find out about Isshiki?”

At this point, she just wanted to get it over with and get out of there. So she dropped an elbow to the table and held her head with her hand. “When I began my search for leads about the mental shutdowns, Akechi was the one who tipped me off to investigate her. He told me that Isshiki had been studying something called cognitive psience, but that all of her research was gone. Sakura-san knew her rather well, and using Isshiki’s daughter was my bargaining chip to make him tell me what he knew about her. It was the only real lead I had to making the connection between the Phantom Thieves and the mental shutdown cases.”

Her free hand curled into a fist under the table. He eyed her with a look that made her fingernails dig deeper into her skin. “You just took his word and assumed Sakura-san would give you what you needed about how to solve the mental shutdowns?”

And just like that, she was defeated. She felt like she had admitted committing a crime to a man who was going to make sure the world knew how much of a *failure* she was. He was disappointed in her lack of rational thinking. It made her soul burn with rage at her own weakness and her head pound with a migraine. She *hated* him for making her feel like she couldn’t do anything right. That she was weak. That she would always need her *father* even when he pushed her further and further away for years.

“You did this to yourself.”

A second later, she felt something on the hand cuffed to Akihiko’s. It was his other hand, but in her withdrawal from the conversation, Minako had also come to sit at his side. Akihiko wore a concerned look. Minako wore a sad smile.

“No matter what happens, Sae, I *promise* I will protect you.” Akihiko’s hand tightened over hers. “I know you don’t always need it, and I know you’re far more gifted and intelligent than I give you credit for. You’ve actually given me a lot to work with, so thank you for being open with me. But please, be careful around Akechi. And if you ever feel trapped, let me know. Please.”

Sae didn’t nod her head, or smile at them, or say anything. She just sat perfectly still, mostly because she was so numb and irritated and desperate to escape the café in general. She hated how she was feeling. She prided herself on her independence. She was smart enough to escape any situation. She was strong enough to escape any situation. But here she was, across from her *parents* , the same people who never cared about the other dark days of her life, feeling like she needed them more than ever.

“I have to return to work.”

Sae shook her arm without lifting her eyes, trying to drop the hint to one of them that she couldn’t go anywhere. A minute later, her wrist was free, and she didn’t waste a second. She grabbed her bag, dropped a few yen coins on the table, and bolted out of the café. She felt like she ran all the way to the station. She was out of breath. The air was too dense for her lungs. Something was burning behind her eyes.

How *dare* they both think of her as a child. She *knew* what she was doing. She now *knew* Akihiko was holding back the key to her biggest case ever.

But did she demand him to supply names?

No.

Did she ask him why he was protecting them?

No.

Did she even ask him about what *he* knew about Isshiki?

No!

The part of it that made her sick was that if Akihiko *knew* and was willing to *protect* , Makoto was likely involved.

She *did* say she would take care of Kaneshiro, then a few weeks later, he was taken care of…

But there was no way. Makoto was too naïve still for her to believe she could be part of a group that went after big name criminals. And she was lost as to *how* they managed to pull off their feats in the first place. Akihiko told her he had *special* power, but what that was, she hadn't a clue, nor did she know if it was hereditary and Makoto would have it. At this point, she would grasp at straws if that meant she could win her case.

And she wanted to win more than ever now. She *had* to prove to both her parents that she didn't need them. She *never* needed them. Because if she started to crack now, then she would have to admit that all those years of drowning in hatred had been for *nothing* . She was *not* one to waste time. Plus, it was a good motivator for her to keep pushing on.

They would see her side of things in the end. Now, she just had to have patience.

Her first task as soon as she had slammed the door to her office was to look into Akihiko's claim that he never touched Masami. If he had been truthful, then she would have no choice but to start believing him. She made a phone call to the medical examiner, asking him to file her the autopsy report, and he sent it to her within the hour.

The cause of death was in fact blunt force trauma by human hands. But when she reached back out to the examiner, asking for the pictures that were missing from the file, he questioned her odd interest. It caught her off guard. It shouldn't be a strange request, but she was met with resistance. In the end, he told her that there were no pictures and rudely ended the conversation with her.

If there were no pictures, how was she supposed to believe the report? Not that she *wanted* to believe Akihiko was telling the truth, given he beat the hell out of Kamoshida (for the right reasons), but

he never *killed* before. On top of that, the police didn't really talk about Akihiko anymore, like he wasn't a concern, or a threat that couldn't be dealt with easily enough…

Who kidnapped him? Because ever since that night, Akihiko was never talked about. Had they known they could silence him? Had the beat down only been necessary to see how *she* would react? If not, and Akihiko had really been the target of the interrogation, why did they arrest him and let him go the same day? Was his kidnapping *planned* , the final straw for the man who had it out for Akihiko? Had she just tipped them off with her growing irritation about no physical evidence to prove or disprove Akihiko's intent to murder?

Akihiko was stabbed over a year ago. The first failure to kill him. Several months ago, he almost suffered a mental shutdown and managed to fight back. The second failed attempt. Then he's brought into the police station and beaten to threaten him? And maybe that had failed, too. Hence why the big bad guy had to personally do something, and that may have been what kept the office quiet and calm, because Akihiko was finally out of the picture for good.

Her head was pounding, but she had to carry on. She was starting to regret not getting the coffee to go, or stopping somewhere on her way back to the office. The conversation from that morning grated on her nerves, pulled her emotions in one direction and another, and frankly, she was exhausted. Annoyed. Tired. Frustrated. And going *nowhere* .

Sickeningly enough, Akihiko's promise to *protect her* was what helped her push past the fatigue and *focus* . She had to find out if Akihiko was telling her the truth. About Akechi, about the mental shutdowns, because if he was right, then maybe the Phantom Thieves *didn't* kill anyone. Vigilante justice was still a crime, but they *had* saved Makoto from Kamoshida, and Kaneshiro…

Makoto had to know the members. It would explain Akihiko's desire to keep his mouth shut. It would explain Makoto's recent backbone. But other than that, she was lost, and Makoto was her *sister* . She wouldn't associate with friends that killed. And if she did, she would

be terrified, and Sae would have picked up on the signs and Akihiko sure as hell wouldn't be defending them.

But Makoto knew Amamiya, and he was a different story. In fact, since Akihiko had taken him in, Sae was positive he was involved. Thanks to Akihiko's line of questioning, she had forgotten to ask him about it. It would have provided one hell of an insight, since she knew very little about the boy. Other than he was a criminal, guilty of an assault on an unknown man, and surprisingly very protective of her sister.

She suddenly hated Akihiko for a different reason. She was so set in her path of finding the Phantom Thieves and thought of nothing else. Now here she was, thinking about everything she had shut her mind off to in the past year, terrified that she *had* been a pawn and now she was buried.

But she was a fighter. She couldn't go down so easily. She wasn't *weak* like he apparently thought she was. She had lived her life for so long without *anyone* , so she sure as hell could figure her way out of this mess alone, too. Then she could shove it in everyone's face for doubting her.

Even better, she could arrest these Phantom Thieves *and* Akihiko for their evasion, win the biggest case of her career, climb the ladder of success, and stand at the top of the world and tell everyone who doubted her to suck it.

To do that, she needed more answers to her growing array of questions.

She would circle back to the Masami case later. She moved on to Isshiki. She had committed suicide, but until she confirmed that with her daughter, who was under Sakura's care, she left her mind open to something different. Akechi had originally been the one to tell her to look into Sakura for information on her, but Sakura had been less than forthcoming. Had he known Sakura would need to be approached in a threatening manner and that was why Akechi relied on her? Would he have really known anything at all? And if not, why would Akechi send her after him?

Mitsuru had worked with Akihiko, so maybe she had that special power, too. But she didn't know anything about Isshiki, and if Mitsuru could find someone, she would. So, how would Akechi have known there was research at all if it was truly gone? And what "friends" did he have that *knew* where to send him without her asking questions?

She had taken his word at face value. She never looked into it herself. She just dove right in. That was likely why Akihiko sounded so surprised when she told him. Now she was *really* upset she didn't ask Akihiko about how *he* knew about a dead woman. She really didn't want to call him and ask him, or go out of her way to meet with him again, since she was desperate to do this alone. Akechi would be her next big help, but…

"I think he's behind the mental shutdowns."

That was one hell of a statement to make. And he said it so convincingly. Akihiko also said Akechi was the one who tried to kill him. And her mother had told her the story later on, after telling the story *to Akechi*. Shortly after, Akechi seems to *know* that the two of them are her *parents.* Then Akihiko is blamed for two counts of murder, his boss and the principle, and when *that* didn't hold up, he's kidnapped and falls off the map.

So who in gods name wanted him to back off? And what was Akihiko digging up that scared someone so much they would go to these kinds of lengths to keep their secret a secret? What was that secret?

"Do you know a Masayoshi Shido?"

She really knew nothing more than what the common person would. He seemed like a typical politician. He wanted to be the leader Japan needed in its time of crisis. The snap election made the public more aware of his determination. He *hated* the Phantom Thieves. However, he never stormed into her office or the police station and demanded action immediately like several other politicians liked to do.

Akihiko struggled to voice his name, almost like he was intimidated of him. And Akihiko was *never* fearful of anyone or anything.

It was enough for her to do a little side investigation. She was not the slightest bit surprised when nothing came up on him. No one in the office was trustworthy or a good investigator in her mind to ask for their help. The only person she felt like she could ask for a hand was the second to last person she wanted to ask.

So, in the meantime, she began looking into Akechi. She learned, to her disbelief, that he was born to a single mother with no record of a father. It struck her as bizarre, but it also made his reactions about *her* father more understandable. Did he know his father, or just hate fathers in general? He was clearly abandoned if he was so angry over it. But he never spoke of his mother either.

Until she looked *her* up and realized she had committed suicide years ago.

For half a second, she pitied Akechi.

But his mother died almost a year before the first recorded case similar to a mental shutdown. Did something snap in him? Had his mother told him to go after his father as she died? Or was *she* the first victim and the father was the criminal all along? And then Akechi followed in his footsteps when he was older?

“Sae-san?”

Sae jumped in her seat, which brought a laugh out of Akechi. She growled at him the next second. “I told you to knock before you come in.”

He smiled like he always did, waving his hand like he hadn’t a care in the world. “My apologies. You just seemed so drawn into your research and I was curious to know if I could help.”

She closed her laptop shut, worried that he would come around the corner of her desk to find she had been looking into *him* . She would rather have the upper hand at this point. “I’ve just been looking into old case files.”

“Ah.” He thankfully took a seat in front of her instead of standing behind her. “Someone said you were asking about Masami’s

autopsy report, yes?"

She didn't figure cluing him in on that tidbit would hurt. "I did."

"Did you find what you were looking for?"

She took a moment to plan out her course of action. She could tell him she did, but then he could question her second call about the missing photos. She could tell him she did not, then question her about what sparked her interest in the first place. Her silence wasn't doing any favors either.

"I was looking for the physical evidence I need to complete my arrest warrant for our criminal."

Akechi seemed satisfied with her answer.

So she thought. "You've never done this much work before. Why don't you just go to the judge and demand it like you always do?"

Her response came quickly. "He has powerful friends."

The gleam in Akechi's eyes caught her off guard. "So do we."

And on a hunch that came from nowhere, she watched Akechi as carefully as she could and asked, "Is Masayoshi Shido one of your *friends?"*

He had *not* been expecting the question, but Sae caught every single detail of his reaction. He was shocked at first, then for that precious half a second he didn't mask well enough, she saw it. The anger. The typical *rage* she saw in criminals when she cornered them. Based on his reaction, he not only knew who the man was, but *knew* him. And if Akechi was this supposed criminal causing the mental shutdowns, she could make a guess that Shido may have had some part in that as well.

Akechi was quick to laugh it all off like she hadn't caught his true feelings. "He's a prominent politician. It's natural to have a man of his stature on our side."

She nodded her head while her heart tried to steady its pace. "It

would seem you know him rather well, but you would prefer not to have anyone know that. Given your reaction, of course."

Then, he flipped the tables on her, his eyes flaring with anger. "Did Akihiko put that in your head?"

For the first time since she knew the boy, she *felt* a demonic side of him. His tone was dark. He practically spit Akihiko's *first* name, something he had *never* done before. And she was worried about why he used his name at all. Either way, the room caved in on her and she thought he was going to attack.

But instead, Akechi hung his head and shook it. "It seems I've underestimated him." He shot up from his chair, but he didn't turn around to leave just yet. "I hope you can trust me, Sae-san. We are the ones on your side here, not him. And I'll prove it to you."

She swallowed. Hard. "And how do you plan to do that?"

The smile he gave her made her blood run cold. "The Phantom Thieves. I'll bring you their leader. And then you can see for yourself where your father's loyalties lie."

He walked out of the room the next second. All Sae could do was stare after him, surprised that Akechi had not only referred to Akihiko as her *father,* but seemed determined to prove himself to her. She was also floored that he seemed to know who to go after. Either way, that feeling she had with him…

There was more to him than she knew. And she could have just created a brand-new wave of problems by mentioning Shido.

It made her that much more convinced that Akihiko had been right all along.

Chapter 120

Chapter 120

Despite the ongoing rumors about the Phantom Thieves being murderers, Ren felt oddly calm.

He figured it was just his brain growing numb to everything after watching Haru's father die. He was hopeful that they would get to the bottom of the mess that was the mental shutdowns, Okumura's death, and the situation he and his friends unknowingly brought upon themselves.

Sanada and Mitsuru had been very understanding as he did his best to tell them all he knew about the Metaverse. He didn't expect them to answer *why him* or *why anyone*, but it was nice to get their side of the story as well. It would likely be a mystery as to why these powers were given to anyone at all, so he took comfort in the fact he wasn't alone, and he now had a new group of allies who were more knowledgeable about the topic. Morgana seemed to appreciate it as well.

The little snippet about Akechi being the black mask culprit, however, still did not sit well with him. He didn't think Sanada was *lying* by any means; it was just so hard to wrap his mind around. Granted it explained some of Akechi's behavior, but he was a kid. Someone who spent his life just like he did; going to school, talking with people, hanging out with friends.

What happened to make them think he was capable of *murder?*

His phone *pinged* in his pocket, so when his teacher turned to the board, he quickly pulled it out. It was a message from Futaba, something quick and simple.

Talk after school!

Right. They all had to sit down and talk. They had so much pent up emotions. Haru wanted to speak to them. They needed a next plan

of action, or to prepare for the worst. He had to tell them what he had talked about with Makoto's family and friends while still respecting her privacy.

He didn't bother to respond until class officially ended for the day. He found the group chat and said basically much the same as Futaba had said earlier.

Everyone agreed.

Once he pushed himself out of his chair and Morgana was in his bag, he walked out of the room and towards the stairwell. Ryuji said he would meet him at Leblanc after he spoke with his old track team. Ann had told him she wanted to see Shiho real quick, then she would stop by. Makoto (of course) was wrapping up some stuff for the approaching culture festival, so he figured he should wait for her. He had the time, after all.

"Heading home?"

Ren pushed himself off the wall, curious to see one of Makoto's older friends, Amada, approaching him. "Um. Yeah. I was going to wait for Makoto."

A smile came to his face. "You fit the protector boy really well."

Ren didn't know what to say to that other than, "Thank you?"

Amada chuckled at him. "I'm actually here because I have something to tell you." Amada leaned back against the wall in a manner similar to Ryuji, but the frown on his face made Ren tense. "I'm supposed to take you to your meeting spot. Mitsuru wants to meet the rest of your group, and she wants you to meet our group as well. Assuming that's okay with you."

It wasn't something he was expecting, but he sure as hell wouldn't tell him no. Amada and his friends would be great allies, and the more eyes on the bad guys and investigating possible leads, the better. Ren nodded his head once. "Alright."

"Perfect." The smile reappeared and Amada threw himself off the wall. "We're a unique bunch of people, so you'll have to forgive us.

It's been a long time since we were all last together."

Just before he walked away, he stopped and turned back to Ren. "Mitsuru is going to pick us up at the station. I didn't get in touch with your other friends before they left, but I guess you're the big one to watch out for."

He swallowed nervously, worried what he had meant by his comment, but then the older man walked off before he had a chance to ask him. Was he already on someone's radar? Should he be looking over his back more often? Were the police going to arrest him, but only when he was alone?

"Ren?"

Like always, the comfortable feeling he had when in Makoto's presence washed all his worries away. He smiled at her as she walked towards him, then he made a move for her hand. "Hi."

She blushed at the contact and he forgot about why he was so tense moments ago. "Um. Are you okay?"

"I am now."

He chuckled at her when she groaned and covered her darkening face with her free hand. "W-We need to get going."

Right. They had work to do. In the past, he always felt like his mind was getting carried away when he thought about the next plan of attack, so he figured it would be ten times worse now that someone was *dead* . But it wasn't. He still felt so *calm* . At ease. Comfortable.

All because he held onto that one thing keeping him together.

It was a shame he couldn't kiss her right then. There were some random students roaming the halls. Even when he felt like he could, there were probably cameras. *Eyes* . It was a surprise no one commented on why she was walking next to him, or why they were holding hands. He took that as a good sign since he didn't want to release her.

Amada was waiting for them when they exited the school lobby. He

flashed Makoto a sly grin. “Does Dad approve?”

Instead of turning away or ignoring his question, Makoto stomped a foot into the ground in a cute way that made him laugh to himself. “Leave me alone.”

Amada just beamed at her and signaled for them to follow after him. Makoto groaned under her breath, but Ren squeezed her hand. “You’re cute when you’re angry.”

“Stop that.”

Had he not been holding her hand as tightly as he was, she would have easily pulled away from him. He found it amusing regardless, but he also didn’t want to hold anyone up. He walked next to her, hand still locked with hers, as they followed behind Amada to the station.

They were all quiet for the short walk, but right before they rounded the corner to enter the station, they ran into someone. Ren assumed it was an accident, even if the guy looked menacing. His business attire made Ren think he was just grumpy from work, but he never walked away. It was hard to see his eyes through the glasses…

“Need something buddy?” The second Amada stepped between him and the unknown man, the man said nothing and turned to walk away.

Makoto voiced the question on his mind. “Did you know him?”

Amada did a quick sweep of the area, which made alarm bells ring in his mind. “No. So keep your guard up.”

Ren was suddenly thankful someone was picking him up and they were driving. Had that man been there for him? Or for Makoto? And would he have done something more *aggressive* had an adult not been with them? Would he have followed them into the station and waited for a better chance to attack?

He held on to Makoto’s hand tightly. Amada was right in front of them, careful not to walk too fast as they entered the station. He only spoke to them once they were inside and away from the recent

crowd that had gotten off the train. “Our ride is outside the next gate.”

Thankfully, the minute walk to the other exit was uneventful. Amada walked up to a nice-looking black car and opened up the back door. “The train is probably faster, but you’ll *love* riding in a Kirijo car.”

The playfulness in Amada’s tone helped to drown out some of Ren’s concerns. And once they were all inside the car, he felt *cool* . The windows were tinted. Everything was dark. It was like a spy car used in a few of the books he had read as a child.

“Ah yeah! Room to stretch. No sweaty people. And on our way for some good coffee! I’m super pumped!”

Ren couldn’t help but crack a smile as the car pulled away from the station. “Excuse him. He needs to learn he’s not a child anymore.”

Amada only shrugged off Mitsuru’s retort. “Meh. Can’t be stiff all the time.”

“So,” Ren began, trying to keep the conversation alive to avoid being at the opposite end of Mitsuru’s pointed words. “You were friends with them back in the day? You look pretty young.”

Instead of an answer, Amada burst into laughter. “He just called you *old* , Mitsuru!”

When Makoto chuckled next to him, Ren worried for his life. “Um…s-sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.”

Thankfully, Mitsuru said nothing back to him and at the next stop, she swatted a hand over Amada’s head. “Respect your elders then.”

“They kind of remind me of our team,” Makoto whispered. “Don’t you agree?”

They certainly did. It was kind of interesting, seeing an older version of their team in person. The older group had worked together to overcome their problems, and that made Ren believe that if they all worked together, they could do the same now.

“To answer your question, I’m a bit younger than they are,” Amada said once they were driving again. “They were all in high school and I was in elementary school when I met them.”

“You were in *elementary* school?”

He laughed at Ren’s surprise. “Sure was. It was kind of cool, hanging around older kids and stuff.”

Someone so young was a persona user? Ren had been *terrified* when he first ran into Arsene. He would have hated to have been any younger. Maybe that explained Amada’s rather cheerful demeanor since it sounded like he didn’t really have a chance to be a child.

…Was that true for Akechi, too?

“Alright. I need to pick up the others, and we will be able to start.” Mitsuru turned in her seat to face him. “You are free to discuss whatever you wish with your friends. I do not want you to see us as your enemy or to feel we are intruding. We are your allies. Whatever we can do to help you, we would like to know.”

It was a statement that resonated in his heart. For so long, he figured he was just going to fight life alone. When he met Ryuji and Ann and everyone else, he felt like maybe there was some hope for him after all. And now, he felt that more powerful than before. He could only nod his head, unable to say *anything* , then followed after Makoto as she got out of the car.

They were a block away from Yongen-Jaya Station. The very same place he had started his journey to find Sojiro. He had come a long way since then. It was nice. He felt he could have called this place his home. He didn’t want to leave, when before, he wanted to return to a hometown that had betrayed him.

But he was so grateful he powered on through. He had great friends. He had a great girlfriend. And he had a purpose.

After Makoto grabbed his hand, he looked ahead of him and smiled. They would see this chaos through no matter what. “Ready?”

Amada had stayed with Mitsuru, so Ren made sure to keep his eyes on the people they passed as he walked up to Leblanc. Futaba was sitting in the farthest booth when they arrived and was quick to jump out of her seat when they walked in.

“Guess what? Guess what?”

Ren had no idea why she was so excited. “Um. What?”

“I have a new friend she’s going to take me to Akihabara this weekend I’m gonna see *soooo* much stuff!”

Makoto smiled beside him. “That’s wonderful, Futaba.”

“Oh. And your sister was here this morning.”

Ren wanted to pull Futaba aside and ask her why she brought it up, but she continued on. “Sojiro told me your mom is a real scary lady. Handcuffed your dad to your sister and said *work it out.* ”

Makoto’s hand flew to her mouth. “H-How do you know…”

Futaba only grinned like a madman. “I know things.”

Makoto shot a glance to Ren, who only sighed heavily in return. “Sanada has spoken to her on a few occasions. Futaba thinks he’s a great guy. But how she *knows* , I have no idea.”

Futaba was nice enough to explain herself. “I heard him talking about your sister, the prosecutor making Sojiro upset. And he called her his daughter. So I put two and two together. And when I look really hard, you all look a lot alike.”

The conversation dropped Makoto into a booth. Ren felt terrible, and if he was reading Futaba right, she felt bad, too. “I…I see…”

“It’s alright, Makoto.” Ren braved taking a few steps towards where she sat. “No one else knows. Futaba just needs to learn when to respect peoples’-,”

“What did they talk about?”

Futaba jumped up, ready to reveal her information. She at least threw herself into the booth behind Makoto, arms dangling over the edge, and whispered quietly. “He asked her where she learned about my mom.”

There was a look of confusion on Makoto’s face. “Why?”

“Because that’s why she was hounding Sojiro.” Futaba leaned in closer. “And from my understanding, Akechi is the one who gave her the lead.”

Ren couldn’t say with certainty that he knew what was happening, but everything suddenly became clearer. Makoto’s sister was looking into the mental shutdowns. She had been investigating Okumura and his poor business choices. Maybe Akechi threw her off Okumura’s trail early with a new purpose, and when Sojiro refused to cooperate, things only got worse.

It was a stretch, but regardless, Akechi knew about Futaba’s mother when very few people did. How *much* he knew, he didn’t want to know. Especially if he was the guy in the black mask.

That would mean he *killed* her mother, or knew who did…

“We should head upstairs.”

He felt terrible for Makoto. She looked so confused and upset and scared. Futaba nodded her head and ran up the stairs, but he grabbed Makoto’s hand before she could follow after the girl. “We’ll figure this out together, alright?”

She struggled for a moment to find the words to say to him. “What if he goes after her next? She has a palace. He has the means.”

He placed both of his hands on her shoulders. “I don’t think he would hurt her. If anything, he’s using her, which might mean he doesn’t want to hurt her. But we’ll help. Don’t worry.”

Her hands covered her face, and for a second, he was worried she was crying. “The closer my dad comes to finding out who the bad guy is, something happens to him. If Akechi finds out she’s speaking to my dad, he’s going to go after her to silence her.”

When she dropped her hands, she was *angry.* He had to fight her a little to keep her from storming off. “Calm down. We can all talk about this together. We can help. If Akechi really is the culprit, then he went after Okumura because we walked into his trap. We won’t make that same mistake again.”

He kept his hands on her shoulders until she heaved a sigh and dropped her head. He wrapped one arm over her shoulders and pulled her into him until her head hit his chest. His hand moved to the base of her neck, his fingers gently moving through her hair. He noticed the night before how it had calmed her down to the point she had fallen asleep, and he could feel the tension leaving her muscles with every breath she took.

When she made a move to pull away, he let her. “Thank you.”

He brushed a few loose strands behind her ear with a smile. “I’d let you fall asleep, but since we’re expecting company, I don’t think you’d sleep well.”

She dropped her head back into his chest with a small laugh. “I don’t want to sleep right now anyway.”

“I wouldn’t let you,” he whispered back. “Because no one else is as smart as you. And we need all the help we can get.”

He breathed out a laugh when she smacked him. “Everyone here is good at something.”

He braved kissing the crown of her head. “You’re really good at being cute.”

This time, she pulled away from him completely and turned her back on him. But not before he got to see that precious blush color her face. “W-We should get moving…”

Within the hour, their friends all stumbled up the stairs and into their respective seats. No one was really all that chatty, but Ren was at least thankful that there was conversation. The girls all talked about school and Futaba’s future exploration of Akihabara that weekend. Ryuji heard about her trip and joined in on it. Yusuke was at least

eating something. Morgana sat quietly on the table as Ren tried to tidy up the room he hadn't slept in for a few nights to make it more presentable.

Hopefully, no one would notice and no one would judge. It was really cramped as it was…

About ten minutes later, Sojiro called up to him to let him know he had "company". He felt everyone's eyes on him, but he pushed the last chair up to the table and sighed. Makoto, however, was the one to speak up.

"My…my friends want to meet you all. A-And I think Mitsuru will be a powerful ally to have on our side."

There were a few confused looks, then Ren added, "They are just like us. They wielded personas back when they were our age. So please," he said quietly, worried he should have asked them all first before finalizing a meeting. "We need their help."

No one really seemed to object, which he was thankful for, but he also wondered how many of them didn't *know* who Makoto's friends were. They all had some interaction with Makoto's father. Amada taught at the school. Mitsuru had been mentioned a few times by now. *He* sadly didn't know more than that.

Without another word, but a few nods from his friends, Ren made the trip down the stairs and froze. There were eight of them. His first thought was how the hell they were all going to be comfortable in his small attic space, but he figured it was the safest place they could all meet. He was sure Mitsuru would have arranged a different spot had there been another option.

"This place has the *best* coffee!"

"Dude. I smell curry! That sounds *so* good right now!"

Minako was the one who smiled at him and approached him first. "Well. This is different, isn't it? Meeting a brand-new group of people that set the path for you?"

"Yeah, you are a cutie, aren't you?"

Another woman came up beside Minako and examined him closely. “This is Yukari. She’s all about learning about the scary boy who stole my daughter’s heart within a year.”

Ren couldn’t deny the blush rising to his cheeks. “O-Oh…”

The woman, Yukari, laughed at him. “He’s definitely cute.”

Minako pulled on a different person, who collided into Yukari enough to push her to the side. “This is Junpei. He loves baseball, and we were a little late because he saw a sign for the cages and got distracted.”

The man flicked at the bill of his cap, then smiled brightly at him. “You play ball, kid?”

“His name is Ren.”

Junpei ignored Yukari’s sharp voice. “You any good?”

He found himself smirking at the undertone. “I can go five for five.”

His eyes lit up. “Oh, hell yeah! Then it’s a challenge! Can’t let a little kid beat me!”

“We are not here to see who can out-bat who.” Mitsuru moved around everyone to stand in front of him. “I apologize for the size of our party.”

Ren found himself enjoying it all. Makoto had said earlier that Amada and Mitsuru’s banter had reminded her of their team. Now he could see the full picture. They were older, sure, but they *were* them at one point in time.

“We can all stand,” Amada said as he looped an arm around Sanada’s neck, who sat in the closest booth. “Except grandpa. He’s tired.”

Most everyone laughed at his joke, but he knew better. The last thing he wanted to do was give Sanada a reason to kill him. So, he twisted around in front of the stairs and lifted his hand. “I hope that’s alright. Can’t say there’s a lot of room.”

“I’m getting coffee first!”

“And curry!”

Yukari sighed dramatically. “Men. They never change.”

“Come,” Mitsuru said, waving everyone to start walking up the stairs. “We shouldn’t linger for long.”

He smiled at the older version of Futaba (he could *not* remember her name) and she bowed back to him when she walked past him. The lively men carried their food and drink up the stairs next. Another unnamed girl stood next to him, eyeing him curiously. It made him slightly nervous. She didn’t seem…normal…

“You. You are criminal Ren Amamiya and not deserving of Mini-Minako.”

“Aigis!”

He would have been extremely horrified at the comment, but Minako grabbed the girl’s arm and reprimanded her off in the corner. He also was taken back when he noticed Sanada *laughing* at him.

“You’ll have to excuse her,” Minako said once she came back into view. “She’s very protective and just says whatever is on her mind.”

It made him feel a little better. “It’s alright, I guess.”

The girl named Aigis bowed deeply to him. “I apologize for my rudeness.” Then, she straightened her back and Mitsuru led her up the stairs.

Which left him in the company of Makoto’s parents. “She’s a robot, if you were wondering.”

That explained that weird feeling he had about the girl. “She looks so human…”

“Well, when you’re around our group long enough, you just find a new meaning of the word ‘normal’.”

Ren smiled at Minako. “I can’t say I disagree.”

“Alright, let’s get moving.” He didn’t know if he should offer his help to Sanada as he struggled to get out of the booth he was sitting at, but he managed on his own. “I’d really like to get out of here as soon as possible. Junpei gives me a headache.”

Minako slapped him on the chest. “Don’t be like this already. You’ve missed him.”

Sanada didn’t say anything, so Ren took the moment to start walking up the stairs to where he hoped his friends weren’t in a full-blown panic with all the new faces. While Ryuji and Ann knew Amada, they wouldn’t have known anyone else. Makoto would have, so hopefully she was handling everything well on her own.

Sure enough, when he reached the top of the stairs, Futaba was side by side with her new friend on her computer. Ryuji was chatting it up with both Amada and Junpei. Haru was off at the wall by his bed speaking with Mitsuru quietly. Yusuke and Ann were interviewing Yukari about something.

It was impressive. Without any real introduction, they all were friends.

As expected, when Ryuji caught sight of Sanada, he immediately rushed up to him. “Dude! I haven’t seen you in like, years!” Just as quickly as he ran up to him, Ryuji frowned deeply. “The hell happened to you?”

Ren pushed Ryuji back a few paces. “You’re going to push him down the stairs.”

“It’s fine.” Sanada moved farther into the room, Minako right behind him. “Your space is barely big enough to fit us all.”

Minako slapped him again. “Don’t be rude.”

“It’s funny,” Sanada started again, taking in the room. “No one has ever really met before, but now they’re all talking like best friends.”

It was pretty neat. Ren had been worried so many new faces would

intimidate his friends, but it did the exact opposite. “Good hearts tend to find company with good people.”

“Here, here!” Futaba waved over at them, then patted the empty seat next to her. “You can sit here, Pops.”

Amada and Junpei burst into laughter and he could have sworn he heard a quiet chuckling from behind him. Sanada said nothing, but maneuvered around the room until he stood in front of the seat Futaba offered him. Before he sat down, he took one of his crutches and smacked Amada on the head, which brought out a new round of laughter from everyone else.

He heard a dramatic sigh behind him. “And this is what I had to put up with all those years ago.”

Ren would rather have this group of people in his life than any of his past acquaintances and family. They all might have had their quirks, but they were good people. All of them. And now it was time for them to come together to fight their common enemy.

“I would like to apologize for the sudden appearance, but it seems you’ve all taken us in rather well.”

Minako moved around Ren to stand over next to Mitsuru as the entire room fell oddly quiet. Like they were all in class and knew better than to act up.

Mitsuru continued to hold their attention. “We’ve been in contact with your friend, Amamiya, recently, and now we would like to introduce ourselves. I am Mitsuru Kirijo, and my family has been leading a secret team to eliminate shadows for decades.”

Most of his friends’ eyes went wide. He could have sworn he heard Ryuji mutter, “For real?”

“Back when we were your age, we also used our personas to fight. There are many differences in our story compared to yours, but the basics don’t seem to have changed: fighting shadows in an alternate form of our world. From my understanding, there are people who are using your known powers for selfish purposes, and we would like to

ask for your assistance in finding these criminals."

"This is so cool," Ryuji said with a growing grin.

Ann reached over and slapped his arm. "Hush."

Mitsuru cracked a smile. "Our team hasn't been as active in the past, so I'm unsure how much use our powers will be to you all. However, as Okumura has told me, there's a serious danger looming over your heads. We are here to help, either by knowledge or extra hands. I too would like to understand what is happening and put an end to it."

Haru was the next person to speak. "The public may have turned your attention to my father as a target, but I am happy for your help." She then bowed to them all. "I am sorry for evading you all. While I am deeply upset over my father's passing, I know it was not your intent. I would also like to ask for your help so we can find those responsible and hold them accountable."

"I…" Ren felt his heart pull in his chest when Futaba lowered her head. She had always been shy around so many people, but when she shook her head and lifted her eyes, he was proud of her. "I want to know the truth about why my mom was killed. You all helped me when I had nowhere to go, when I was believing it was my fault, so I want to find these people too!"

Ryuji pumped a fist into the air. "Hell yeah! With all of us, ain't no one gonna stand in our way!"

"We clearly don't know enough about what's happening," Yusuke added. "Any amount of support would be appreciated, I'm sure."

"There's much we still do not know as well." Mitsuru's eyes scanned around the room. "So anything you learn, we would like to ask you to share. We will do the same on our end."

There were nods of heads, quiet agreements, high fives…

Then, "But how?"

Makoto was too far away from him for his liking. She appeared to

still be holding onto some anger about what she learned from Futaba minutes ago. He wanted to reassure her everything would be okay, but it did bring up a valid point. While the extra help was wonderful, he had no idea where to even *start* anything.

He at least took some comfort in the fact Makoto sat down on his bed. Maybe that helped her calm down, too. “I don’t mean to be negative in light of everyone’s excitement, but we have yet to learn anything about who wanted to set us up, if someone set us up, and why.”

The woman next to Futaba slowly came to her feet. “I have been looking into it. While it’s still not concrete, I can see a similar pattern in the code that was used for the Medjed plot and the votes for you all to target Okumura.”

“She’s right,” Futaba added, jumping back on to her computer. “I don’t know why I didn’t see it before. They weren’t even trying to be covert about it.”

“I’m totally lost.”

Ryuji nodded and agreed with Junpei’s statement. “Dude. Me too.”

“Basically, the same people who fronted Medjed are the same people who pushed Okumura’s name to the top of our list.”

If Futaba and her friend were right, which they likely were, then they were set up. The *public* hadn’t demanded them to change Okumura’s heart, but likely their enemies. They fell right into a well-designed trap without even *blinking* .

“Don’t be too hard on yourselves,” Mitsuru said quietly. “The site rating had little to do with your ultimate decision, if I’m correct.”

Haru nodded off to the side. “Please, don’t worry. I asked you to do this. And you saved me.”

“So we were set up by the people who started Medjed?” Morgana scratched at his ear. “So was Medjed just a test to see how we would respond?”

Some of the new faces all looked around the room like they had no idea Morgana was *talking* . “The hell?”

The robot girl, Aigis, walked right up to Morgana and picked him up off the table. “He is fluffy.”

“That day,” Amada quietly said as he leaned forward and eyed him curiously. “I heard your cat. How the hell did I hear a cat?”

“It happened when I took you to the Metaverse.” Now he *really* wanted to cross the room and sit next to Makoto. “Anyone who goes there can hear him when they come out.”

“That cat *talks?”*

Minako laughed at Yukari’s surprise. “He does. He also likes to be held and petted. And he *is* fluffy.”

Morgana was probably the happiest cat right now, getting all the attention he had ever wanted from females.

Yusuke brought the conversation back around. “So we know we have been set up. How do we go about finding out *who* set us up?”

It was a question Ren likely didn’t think anyone would have an answer to yet. Mitsuru spared a look to Sanada, and he was curious to know if this was going to be the moment they mentioned Akechi and his possible role in everything.

But they didn’t.

Instead, Minako took the floor and turned her eyes to him. “I want you to go after someone.”

There was a seriousness on her face he had never seen before. He held his breath.

“I want you to go after Sae Niijima.”

Chapter 121

Chapter 121

The second Minako told Amamiya to go after Sae, he snapped.

How the hell did she think that asking them to go after their daughter would do any good? Their last target was *murdered* . Didn't she see the danger she had just placed her in? Why would she do this without asking *him?*

"Have you lost your damn mind?"

He had been in pain all day. His knee was burning again. He had a massive headache from listening to Junpei loudly exclaim how awesome Tokyo was the entire ride over. And now Minako had crossed a line.

But she was quick to come to her defense. "We can't keep doing this, Aki. We *have* to help her. And this is the only way we can do that."

He clenched his hands by his side. "This is the *last* thing that will help."

"This might actually have its own benefits for a future plan."

And now *Mitsuru* was against him?

"Hear me out, Akihiko. If we can gain a better understanding of the layout of her palace, we could use that to our advantage to bait our culprit."

He was on his feet the next second. "You want to lure a murderer into my daughter's conscious? He's going to *kill* her!"

The room was silent.

Everything was cold.

…He said too much.

In front of a group of fucking kids…

He dropped back down to the seat and covered his face with his hands.

“The important thing we need to do right now is understand who is involved and what their goals are.” Mitsuru’s voice was quiet and calm, but he didn’t even register anything at this point. He was in a rage. He could understand Minako’s desire to bring their daughter back, but this plan was only going to *kill* her. Or, if successful, it would *force* her to change. He had told her that several months ago.

“She’s not going to die, because *we* are going to save her.”

Akihiko wanted to shut down the thought all together, but when he lowered his hands and looked at his other daughter, he knew she would win that fight. She had been very quiet all afternoon, so the fact she was taking this moment to make her voice known, she was doing so with a purpose.

“When Kamoshida was threatening me, you protected me. When I went off to find Kaneshiro, you protected me. So I know you can do the same for Sis.”

“She won’t be alone.” Amamiya had the nerve to move to stand right next to Makoto. “We’ll all be there, too. With your intelligence and our methods, everything will go as we plan it to.”

“Woah, woah, hold up.” Ryuji, the poor kid, kept twisting his head in a one-eighty before keeping his gaze on him. “You…” He then turned to Makoto again. “You’re like…” Akihiko thought Ryuji was going to pass out. “You’re *related?”*

He gave a hard stare to Minako, who surprisingly turned away. Then Makoto came to stand in his line of sight. “You went through with your surgery to help us. And in order to fully help, they need to know.”

There was a pressure he hadn’t felt in *years* building up in his chest. He thought he was going to be sick.

“It’s okay, Pops.” There was a light pat on his forearm. When he looked over, Futaba was smiling at him. “It’s kinda not a big secret anymore. I know. Ren knows. Mona knows. Your friends know, yeah?”

“I have to admit, I may know as well.” The young Okumura girl bowed to him. “I may have prodded Mako-chan one day after school and she informed me of the situation between you and her sister.”

He still didn’t want to think about what was happening, what was *going* to happen.

“You told Sae this morning that you would rather her *know* than be ignorant.” His eyes found Minako’s, and she was just as determined as Makoto was. They both had that fire in their eyes that made it hard for him to argue back. “Take a look around you, Aki. All of us are going to help you. There’s enough people in this room to find a way to save Sae, to protect Makoto, and to make everything *better.”*

“Akihiko.” His eyes shifted to Mitsuru. “If we can bring our ‘friend’ into this successfully, you won’t have to worry about anything. You’ve worked with us long enough to know what we are capable of. Do not start underestimating us now.”

He released a long, deep breath. “You’re *forcing* her to change. How will that make things *better?”*

The small smile that came to Minako’s face made him brace himself. “There was a time when both Sae and Makoto were young, and both of them loved to pull open drawers and get their hands on whatever they could find.”

Makoto jumped slightly in her place before her hands flew to her face. “S-Stop it!”

Minako did not. “And one of the things Makoto managed to snag from the kitchen was a knife. And she wielded it like a true assassin. You, of course, pulled it from her hands and told her no. And she screamed and yelled and cried and threw a fit for *days* . She even tried to find a *different* knife to play with instead.”

“Stop!”

“You *forced* Makoto to stop playing with her weapons because you knew it was the right thing to do. She didn’t understand the danger she was putting anyone in, or herself in, and she might not to this *day* know that.”

Amamiya found something funny. Makoto only groaned behind her hands. Most of the other teenagers were either stunned silent or amused as well.

“Sae might be old enough to make these kinds of decisions on her own, but we won’t be *forcing* her to do anything. It’s our *job* to recognize the trouble she’s in and to correct it before it ends up hurting someone, or even herself. If you walk away, letting her wield that knife and she kills someone, or stabs herself, what would you do then?”

Minako went out of her way to explain her reasoning, but in an odd way, it worked. He knew Sae was hurting other people. She was threatening Sojiro. She was throwing innocent people behind bars to prove that she was a force to be reckoned with. How many more people would have to *suffer* for him to realize she wouldn’t *stop?*

“Oh, shit…” Akihiko hoped Ryuji wouldn’t comment on Makoto’s childhood, for his own safety. “Sanada is your *dad?”*

He was pretty sure Ryuji was the *last* person to figure it out, so now that everyone was aware, he grew more agitated. “Yeah. And I’ve been making all three of them hide the fact they even knew me so criminals wouldn’t find them and hurt them. But here I am now, being asked to let someone who had tried to *kill* me walk into Sae’s palace and hope for the best.”

“Do you trust me?”

He had seen that look in Makoto’s eyes once before, back when she was trying to convince him not to retire. But it wasn’t her duty to protect *him,* or her older sister, when he was too scared to do it. It shouldn’t have to fall on any of them. Sae’s sole reason for spawning a palace was because of *him* .

“This shouldn’t have to fall on your shoulders, Makoto.”

“It’s not,” she replied quickly. “Because I think I’m strong enough to take it off of yours.”

And he was defeated. Makoto was adamant about her desire to save her sister, to save her family, and it left him feeling a mix of emotions. But he was proud of her. Proud of the life she was living, the example she was setting, the future she wanted and would fight for.

Mitsuru must have sensed his change of heart and took over the conversation once more. “We have a starting point. For now, Amamiya, your team is to remain as usual. Focus on your studies and your normal routine. My team will start our strategy. As soon as we have a basic outline, I would like to ask to meet again and share our findings.”

Amamiya nodded his head, but said nothing.

“Fuuka, I would like you to find all that you can about our suspect in question, as well as all you can on Medjed and those involved.”

Futaba jumped up in her seat. “Ooo! I can help you there! Because I originally founded Medjed.”

Mitsuru was very hard to be taken off guard, but this was a rare moment. “W-What?”

“I made it. But I abandoned it a while back. It shouldn’t be hard for me to look into.”

The young girl would forever leave him stunned. Mitsuru thought much the same. “I-I would appreciate that, then…” Once Futaba nodded in agreement, Mitsuru continued dishing out the roles. “Aigis. You will resume your watch on Sae. Report to me with any people speaking to her at length.”

Aigis simply hummed her reply.

“Ken. You will keep post at Shujin and make sure the police, or any other people, don’t start poking around. Keep me informed on any

promising rumors about the principal or any students under scrutiny."

Ken replied with a thumbs up.

"Junpei and Yukari. Both of you will keep tabs on the police. As Akihiko cannot return to work at the moment, I need one of you to scout out Kasumigaseki at all times. I want to stay one step ahead of them."

Then, "And I would like one last request from you, Sakura-san." Futaba perked up when Mitsuru's eyes found her. "Your recordings on Leblanc. If you have anything of value, I would like to hear them."

She had the place *bugged?* Had *that* been how she learned about Sae being his daughter? From listening to *him?*

"And Minako, please keep Akihiko out of trouble and off his feet unless absolutely necessary."

Akihiko tried not to roll his eyes, but rest sounded so good right now. He needed a break from this room, from everyone, from his own mind.

"She got the hardest job of all!"

If he had the heart, he would have hit Ken a second time.

Mitsuru bowed to them all. "I thank you for your time. If there is anything you would like us to know, do not hesitate to reach out to us." She handed Amamiya a small card. "I will be available whenever you need me."

"Thank you."

Junpei was the first one to stand up and stretch out his back. "Ah, man, I am whooped. Maybe I'm getting too old now." That was when he spotted something in the corner of the room. "Oh. Oh my *god!* Is that…" He ran over and grabbed some kind of small box from a table. "I *love* this game!"

Ryuji was quick to join him by the TV. "Dude, dude! I will totally kick

your ass!”

“Ryuji!”

“You’re on, little man!”

He heard Mitsuru sigh over the commotion. “However you choose to spend your evening is up to you, but please do not bother the children. They have to report to school in the morning.”

Junpei and Ryuji seemed to ignore her completely. The blonde girl (he couldn’t remember her name) walked up behind Ryuji and pulled on his ear. It got him to stop shouting, at least.

“I am ready for my nightly drink!” Ken pushed himself off the floor and turned to Amamiya. “Know any good bars around here?”

Like a child would know the answer to that.

Futaba was talking to Fuuka about her new “calling”, while also planning their future trip to Akihabara. Mitsuru had turned her attention to Okumura, but they were too far away for him to know what they were talking about. Ken had been randomly caught in a conversation with the supposed artist on his way out, hopefully not about *alcohol* . He heard Ken mention *food* and *art* , so he assumed it was alright to let the two of them leave without supervision.

He also didn’t peg Ken to be an *art* person.

But most of the attention had shifted from a single focus and onto a million others. It was the perfect time for him to slip out, unnoticed or not, and get that breath of fresh air he needed desperately. If no one noticed him leaving, he knew someone would notice him missing by the time he reached the bottom of the stairs. How Amamiya walked down these things without ever falling was a miracle. He sure as hell didn’t want to walk back down them right now.

He gave a pitiful good night to Sojiro, who oddly hadn’t questioned why so many people were in his establishment upstairs. It may have been a sign of good faith, that he trusted him and Mitsuru, and maybe even trusted the group of teens that had supposedly made the attic space their safe place.

It was getting late. Nothing too terrible, but there was a cold chill that numbed him when he walked out of the café. There was nowhere to sit and catch his breath, and he would feel awkward if he went back inside just to sit down. The station wasn't too far away, but it was far enough. And if he sat down on the ground, he wasn't going to be getting back up.

He did the next best thing and leaned back against a nearby wall. As he looked up at the darkening sky, he wondered if he could see the stars out this far. It was damn near impossible to see them in Tokyo, no matter how clear the day, and he couldn't think of the last time he had seen them. The day he walked with Minako on the beach, but his attention hadn't been on the sky as much as it had been on the woman he was with.

He still felt a stab of betrayal when she asked Amamiya to go after their daughter. She didn't really hint at asking the group to take on this new task. She may have mentioned it the night before, but that was a huge jump to make. What had she been *thinking?* Without even *asking* him first…

"You're mad at me."

Akihiko knew Minako would be the one to find him first. Not that he *wanted* her to, but he expected it. "I am."

He heard her sigh as she came to a stop at his side. "This is the only way to help her."

"You didn't even ask me first."

"If I would have sat down and talked to you about it, you would have not only grown mad at me, you would have convinced me that everything would be okay." She pulled on his arm until he looked over at her. "And nothing is *okay* anymore. I'm *tired* of saying she needs more time, because she's only getting worse."

His eyes narrowed as he looked away. "Why did you set up our meeting this morning then? She actually *spoke* to me. She didn't charge out of the café. She didn't start screaming at me. But yet you think that this is the best-,"

“She’s *hurting* , Aki.” She moved to stand in front of him and tugged on both of his arms, careful not to pull him off balance. His shoulders dropped with his exhale. A sign of exhaustion, or defeat, or annoyance. Or all of them. “And she’s hurting because we let her drown in her anger for too long. So we have to act *now.”*

He pulled his hands out of hers. “So you think the best way to do that is telling a room full of kids that *our* daughter needs help? Their last target was *murdered,* Minako. Did you not think that Akechi would follow after them again and *kill* Sae?”

He didn’t know what to make of the shy smile that appeared on her face. “You underestimate everyone, Aki. We *know* . And since we know, we can plan. And if everything goes well, not only will we catch the bad guys, but we will have our daughter back.”

A hand flew to the side of his head to nurse an oncoming headache. “And what if we *fail?”*

“I suggest you get to work as soon as possible.” She let off a soft laugh. “In order to succeed, you have to give your all. You have to trust your friends. We’ve all overcome so many obstacles in our time together. I have no doubt that we will be just fine.”

He really didn’t want to keep arguing, seeing that she was so determined and he was losing steam, but this was his *daughter* . Not a bad guy. Not *death* . Not himself. Even with the smallest chance of failure, it could cost Sae her life.

“Sae isn’t any safer in this world than she is in the other.” Minako stepped into him and carefully lifted her arms to wrap around his back. “But in the other world, we have strength in numbers. We *know* the enemy. I’ll take my chances there before having to rely on a million trained and trusted friends to follow her around and expect them to never leave her side. Sae will notice. Other people watching her will notice. It’s only a matter of time.”

It annoyed him, but she was right. At this point, Sae was likely in danger no matter where she was. He didn’t like to think about it, and he might be willing to find a million trained and trusted friends to follow after her now, but he knew Sae. That would only irritate her.

She would dive further into trouble.

Either way, he was going to be losing his mind. But given his physical condition and Sae's hatred for him, he had to protect her from a distance. He had to outsmart those who thought they could win. He had several friends with resources to get that done. So Minako was right. It *had* to be done and this was, unfortunately, the best and safest way to help.

He just didn't tell her that.

Mitsuru was the first person after Minako to head out of the building. Minako leaned back and gave him a weak half smile. "I'll go fetch Makoto and Ren. We need to get you home."

Right. Amamiya was staying with them. For now.

"As soon as he feels comfortable, he should return back to Leblanc," Mitsuru told him as Minako walked past her into the building. "He will draw too much attention if anyone notices he's gone for more than a week."

Akihiko found himself nodding. "I'll talk to him."

Mitsuru stood at his side and crossed her arms. "I know you don't want to hear this, but Minako's suggestion couldn't have come at a better time. This is a perfect chance to catch the culprit in the act while having the upper hand."

He sighed loudly. "She's my *daughter."*

"I think it's because Sae *is* your daughter that we can do this." He cast a look over to Mitsuru, confused. "You've always been strong, Akihiko, mentally and physically. Had she been anybody else, perhaps I would be more concerned. But she's very much like you. She's strong. She's smart. She's resilient. And more than that, she has a good heart. Our path might be difficult, but I assure you that everything will be fine."

It would be easier said than done.

She chuckled. "I'm not expecting you *not* to worry, but take that

energy and time and spend it looking into Shido. I believe there's more to his role in this than I was willing to admit to you before."

Hearing Mitsuru mention *Shido* took him by surprise. "I thought you told me to stay away from him."

Her smile widened. "When do you ever listen to me?"

It caught him off guard. Mitsuru breathed out a laugh through her nose. She then reached into her bag and pulled out a small file and handed it to him. "There are far too many connections for me to overlook. Most of the information Fuuka had looked into months ago, we've finally tied to Shido."

Akihiko took the file from her hand, but he didn't need to look through it to know who he was dealing with. "He kidnapped me and told me he had Isshiki killed. She knew what he was doing in the Metaverse. He had my partner killed. He probably has something to do with Murakami's disappearance. But no matter how much I look or try to think about it, I can't figure out why *Akechi."*

"Do you believe there's a connection?"

He did, but proving it was impossible. The only good lead he had aside from his own experience had been when Sae had told him Akechi was the one to push her into looking into Sakura for information. Because if Akechi did kill her, then he would *know* where to send her at least. But then he was asking *why* Akechi would give Sae a solid lead if it could backfire in his face.

"It's just so…abstract…I guess." He crossed his arms again. "Akechi might have a darker side that we know nothing about, but murder for hire is a little ridiculous. Especially at the age he would have been for the first one."

Mitsuru turned to face him fully. "If I may be as *abstract* in my thoughts, I believe Shido and Akechi are related on some level."

That knocked him back. "W-What?"

She held up a hand, but he couldn't form any words to speak anyway. "The best of my team looked into Akechi and could only

find a simple fact about his mother. She committed suicide. His father was never mentioned, never present. So the question remains is how did an orphan gain these powers and befriend Shido so quickly unless they had some kind of relationship?"

It was all too much for him to think about without feeling sick. But Ohya had asked a similar question when she had tried digging up details on his partner's investigations into Shido.

"How the hell did someone with nothing become a star without doing something?"

But *why?*

Akihiko figured a relationship between Akechi and Shido might help make sense of it. Akechi wanted to make Shido proud, in some regards. It was a shame he had never sat down and discussed family with Akechi, too afraid for the smart teen to turn the tables on him and be caught in a mess. Maybe Sae would know? Would she tell him? She had told him Akechi was the one to direct her in one specific direction when the path was never clear to her before, so there had to be *some* level of trust between the two of them.

"We will continue to investigate," Mitsuru finally said in the silence. His head was pounding, but he knew he was *so close* to the truth. It frustrated him. "But for now, you need to rest. You will be no use to me tired, weak, and unable to walk."

He muttered a quiet, "Thanks," under his breath.

She pushed herself off the wall with a frown. "I mean it, Akihiko. You're this close to solving this case. But you must be smart about it. Your impatience will get you killed, and with it, all your valuable information will go with you. It's going to be hard, but rest. Trust in your friends. We *will* see an end to this madness."

He could only hope.

Chapter 122

Chapter 122

Makoto was beyond overwhelmed, lost, and frustrated because she couldn't find the time to stop and *think* .

It had been a few days since everyone got together and her *mother* asked them to target Sae. Her dad was still bitter over it, something Makoto could understand. However, they couldn't keep ignoring Sae's wrath and hide in the shadows. They had to fight. The sooner they saved her sister, the quicker they could not only save her victims, but solve this mysterious case.

And that was where she was struggling.

Makoto wanted to save Sae. She just couldn't do it on one day, alone, and after a few hours of planning her strategy. On top of that, she was student council president. She had to resolve the issue with Eiko. She had to deal with the constant questions and requests from the students and teachers as the culture festival neared. Mishima didn't slow down his requests either. There was a tension between her parents again. She hadn't even applied to colleges yet…

She figured the stress would make a great learning experience to prepare for her future.

She also knew she wasn't alone. She had friends. She had her parents' friends. She had her family. They would all work together to help Sae, to help her, to help *everyone* . She probably had nothing to worry about.

Probably .

But she worried all the same. What if their combined efforts didn't save Sae? What if Akechi did something unpredictable? What if Akechi wasn't really who they should be focusing on? Would they ever find out who was pulling the strings? Was there someone?

She suddenly missed Ren's presence in the apartment. He had gone back home that night, per Mitsuru's request to keep suspicion off of him. And ever since, she had been a mental wreck.

Makoto didn't eat much of a dinner, excusing herself long before her meal was finished. Surprisingly, neither her mom nor her dad stopped her as she walked into her room to think. While it may have been a self-made title, she considered herself the strategist of the team. They all looked up to her for advice and plans in a battle. She had no time to spare. Even if she hadn't been to Sae's palace in a while, she knew her sister was a force to be reckoned with. Plus, if she went back with a half-hearted plan, Sae would eat her and her friends alive.

Sadly, she didn't even know where to start her thought process. She had to prioritize school, but Sae was her *sister* . Had she never had these mysterious powers, then she would be forced to rely on those who did, if she knew about them at all. But she did know. She had the power to help. And that meant she was going to be heavily involved with how things turned out.

But if she started slipping in school, people would know. The more eyes on her, the more people would talk. And if people spoke *too* much, there could be serious trouble. She'd rather not have that.

After an hour of sitting in her room at her desk, she decided that Sae had to be put on the backburner for now. What she had to focus on now was the culture festival. So many students were excited. The student council actually took their job seriously for once. It was kind of nice to have a rejuvenated spirit of energy back in the halls that had been so quiet and timid.

Until she found out *why.*

Over half of the population at school voted for *Akechi* to be their notable guest speaker. The *last* person she wanted to ask to be a guest was a kid who may have tried to kill her father and possibly knew she was a Phantom Thief.

Ren, however, had told her it might be a good thing. She could try and trip him up. Pick his brain a little. Watch how he reacted in front

of a body of excited fans.

Because she needed another thing to stress over.

Her head was pounding, yet she hadn't gotten anywhere. How did people do this so well in a short amount of time? Ren was actually pretty good about juggling a million things while still being able to *do* a million other things. Maybe she could ask him for his secret, if he had one. Or he would be willing to teach her his ways…

A light tapping on the door almost made her tip backwards and onto the floor. Makoto managed to catch herself by gripping her desk, then shot a glance to the clock.

Maybe she would be better at accomplishing things if she didn't waste three hours just running in circles. It would also explain why she was so *tired* .

She thought it best not to annoy her mom or her dad and answer the door. But before she could get up out of her seat, the door cracked open on its own. She expected to see her mom, since she was usually the one who came to check on her when she didn't eat dinner. She grew a little nervous when her dad popped his head into the room with a small smile.

"Whatcha doing?"

Why did he want to know? And why did he look so…intrigued? "Um. I-I was…finishing up some homework…"

She knew he caught on to her lie, since there was nothing on her desk to prove she was working on anything related to school. Her head fell when he stepped into the room fully, using a shoulder to pry the door open further.

"Let's go for a walk."

Immediately, she tensed up. It was not only getting late, but he shouldn't really be out and about on crutches. She also didn't know why he was asking her to walk with him. If she was in trouble, or if he was mad at her, he never hesitated to say anything in the moment.

“Am…A-Am I in trouble?”

His quiet laugh did nothing to calm her nerves. “No. I just need some fresh air. And I think you do, too.”

Her first reaction was to question why he wanted to get out, especially so late. But he had a weird aura about him that made her voice catch in her throat. In the end, she thought a little air might be helpful and maybe it would get rid of her current headache.

Oddly enough, she didn’t see her mom as she followed behind her dad to the door. Knowing her dad, he likely didn’t say he was going out with her. And he *did* say he would stay off of his leg, so why was he so eager to go out?

Her heart fell into her stomach. “I-Is everything okay…? W-With you…a-and Mom?”

He seemed surprised by her question, then shook his head with another laugh. “This doesn’t have anything to do with your mom, Makoto.”

“Then why are we going out?”

He chose not to answer her, which left her extremely confused. She didn’t question him again as he led her out of the apartment and the building. Makoto was mindful of where they were going, who was around them, but after a block or two, she had *no* idea where he was taking her.

Thankfully, it was late enough that only a few people were out and about, so she stood by his side and tried to understand what was going through his head. “So. Um. W-Where are we going?”

He again said nothing to her, and a part of her worried he really was upset with her, or her mom. Her heart began to pick up the pace as a million thoughts and concerns turned over in her head. She knew he was upset over her mom naming Sae in front of her friends, but she thought it was okay. She promised him it would be okay.

Did he still not *trust* her?

“I used to bring you here, with your sister, back when you were both so young.”

Hearing his voice, Makoto shot her head up and realized they were standing right outside a park. There were a few adults and children walking around, but she could not remember being there before. She also couldn’t think about why he had decided to tell her all of the sudden. Or why her dad decided to come here at all.

Deep down, she knew it had to do with Sae. The memory was likely brought up so he could convince her not to do anything. That Sae would turn back to her normal self on her own.

He didn’t speak again until they were both sitting down on a bench, his eyes staring out to the small playground surrounded by trees. “I don’t think I ever told Sae, or enough so she believed it, but she was a wonderful sister. She loved you so much.”

She wanted to ask why he was telling her this, even if she knew, but his expression trapped her words in her throat. He seemed so *happy* , like he was finding peace in the images in his head. Not that she wasn’t thrilled to see it, she just knew there was a bomb coming and she needed to brace herself for it.

So when he sighed heavily, she did exactly that. “She would push you in your swing. She would hold your hand when you were too terrified to go down the slide. But she was never afraid to tell you no when you tried to push and shove your way through the line of kids waiting to go down the slide.”

She felt her face heat up. At least this time, her friends weren’t around to hear another of her embarrassing stories. “I-I don’t remember…t-this…”

“I didn’t come out here too often, and you were pretty young.” She watched him lean back in his seat and inhale deeply. “You liked to make a scene when Sae put her foot down, which started to annoy her since I didn’t want to intervene with people watching.”

And there was the moment she was waiting for. The sadness. The regret. The foundation of his case to get her to leave her sister

alone. She didn't hesitate again. "I have to save her, Dad. And I need you to trust me."

"I know you think I brought you out here to reminisce about a better time with you and your sister, but I didn't." He caught her slightly off guard when he turned to her, eyes serious, and the smile gone. "I've spent so much of my life as a father wishing I could go back in time and change what I did to you. I've spent so much time thinking about times both of you were happy. And because of that, I've missed out on so much of your life as you grew up. You've gone from a child to an adult overnight. I blink and you're not a defenseless little girl who would cry like it was the end of the world when you hit your head. You're a strong and intelligent woman with a determination to make a better world."

She couldn't tell if she wanted to get up and run away from him because she was embarrassed, or if she wanted to hug him and cry because she didn't know how else to express herself. In the end, she didn't do anything, just sat next to him, speechless.

He threw himself back against the bench, but at least there was a small smile forming on his face. "I know how badly your sister hates me, and I can't deny that I've given her every reason to. And up until now, I've been trying to apologize to her for failing to be there in the past. I wanted to make up that lost time with her, to which she always pushed me away. But this…this is different. Because instead of trying to fix our past, I need to focus on our future."

She felt herself scoot a little closer to him. "I know it's scary, and it's hard, because if I'm being honest, I'm worried. I really am. But…it's my duty as her sister. And as your daughter, I'm going to help you to help her, too."

He turned his smile to her. "You've been such an amazing inspiration when I thought I would never want to get up again. I was so angry with your mother, and I feel like a part of me still was, until this moment. You remind me a lot of her, you know?"

This time, she lowered her head to hide the blush she could feel, but doubted he could see in the night. "S-She tells me I remind her of you."

His arm wrapped around her shoulders, but he didn't pull her into him like she thought he was going to. "Well, there's something else I've learned, watching you these past few weeks."

The sadness in his tone made her worried. "O-Okay?"

"You're not alone, Makoto." He pulled her into him this time. "You always tell me you want to be strong, that you want to protect me, and your sister. And while I think you're more than capable, maybe I've given you the wrong impression. I don't want you to think that you can't count on me or come talk to me when something is upsetting you. I don't want you to think like I can't help you carry your burdens when you feel like you are being weighed down. Like right now."

She struggled for several seconds. A small part of her wanted to tell him she was okay. She had good friends. She had to prove to him that she wasn't a child anymore. She couldn't grow up and live her own life if she always had to depend on him.

But oddly enough, she needed to hear him say it. She felt all of her previous anxiety bubble up in her throat and she knew better than to bite it back down. "I'm terrified. I have to plan the culture festival and the students want Akechi to be the guest speaker. I'm worried he's going to use the chance against me, and my friends. I'm worried he's going to go after Sis. I'm worried about all my other duties I've been neglecting because I've been so *scared."*

His hold didn't loosen around her, and she was grateful. "It's one of the terrors of growing up. And I can say this a million times to you, but you have your friends. You have your mother and me. You're not in any of this alone."

"I know…b-but…" She stuttered, paused, took a breath, then finished. "But I'm still worried that if I don't give everything my all, I'm going to fail. If I don't have a backup plan for every available outcome, I'm going to fail. A-And I don't want anyone to feel obligated to help me."

"If you spend your entire life thinking, you'll get nothing done." He chuckled next to her, which she didn't know how to take. "I was like

that when I first started working as a cop. I would lose track of time just thinking of every possible outcome to catch a criminal. It angered your mother. It kept me away from your sister. But my friend liked to remind me that every plan has a weak link, a flaw, something *wrong* . I was better off writing a textbook on police work than actually *doing* it. And I have to admit, he was right."

She turned under his arm to face her. "Then what if I make a plan to help Sis and it goes *wrong?"*

He looked right at her, and with all seriousness said, "Then you trust your instincts to do what you do best in the heat of the moment."

She expected him to reassure her nothing would happen to Sae, or to tell her to plan harder. To trust herself and her friends. "W-What?"

"You're smart, Makoto, and I've watched you when we go out to Kabukicho. But you always *doubt* yourself. While a little bit of worry isn't always a *bad* thing, it's keeping you from believing in yourself."

Again, his words caused her to choke up. "B-But…"

He grabbed her chin when she tried looking away. "You are going to be fine. Your sister is going to be fine. We can both worry in equal amounts, and use that fear to make sure everything is planned out, that every little detail is perfect. And if not, we correct it immediately."

"What if we're too late?"

He released her and she took the moment to lower her head to hide the tears coming to her eyes. The last thing she wanted was for him to think she was weak again. But she was scared. This was her *sister* , someone she loved so much. Someone who had been suffering in her own way for so long and now, there might not be a chance to save her.

"Then we're too late."

Makoto shot her head back up and stared back at him, horrified that he had been so *calm* about it. But before she could question him, he held up a hand to stop her. "It's terrifying, I know, but I have to be

honest with you. And if we all fail, and something happens to Sae, then I want to be able to say I at least did everything I could. Overthinking, worrying like this, losing sleep over the *what if's* aren't going to make me give my all. Because that is when you truly fail."

He made it sound so easy, but she also had to understand he had *years* of experience to hold over her head. She also had to understand she wasn't alone. She also needed to remember that if Sae didn't stop, innocent people were likely to be caught in her path. And the longer she cowered behind her bond, the more Sae would eventually hate herself in the end.

She felt his arm around her shoulders again. "We'll take it one day at a time. That's all we can do."

She leaned against him a minute later, suddenly exhausted and regretting not finishing her dinner. "How do you do it? How do you stay so focused with a million thoughts and things to do?"

He leaned into her, too. "If you think I have it all together, then you're sadly mistaken."

"Why?" she asked with some confusion in her voice.

"Because I panic every single day when I wake up," he told her as his arm tightened around her. "I worry about your mom. You. Your sister. The what ifs of the past. The what ifs of the future. The people I couldn't save before. The people I can't save now. But one of life's greatest lessons is learning that you can't win every battle. You can't do everything. You're going to fail. You're going to hurt. You're going to be weak."

He dropped his head to hers before continuing. "But I'm here now. I have to do what I can with the time I have so I can face all of those who have moved on. If I let every failure take me out, I would have given up long before I met your mother. And sometimes, that perspective keeps me going. Because I did get to meet your mom, and I got to have you, and your sister. And through you, I got to meet your friends. So when I feel like I'm at my limit, I don't know what to do, I take that step back and think about why I took that initial step in the first place."

It was strange to hear her dad speak to her like this. It wasn't *bad* , because she really needed that motivation from a motivational person who was also suffering from the same fears that she was. She was also happy hearing him sound so *strong* , so sure of himself. It was almost like the tables had flipped and now she was the one who needed to hear that everything would be okay in the end.

"Maybe we've both expected too much out of ourselves recently," he added. "We shouldn't have to feel like the world is on our shoulders. So from now on, if anything is troubling you, you should talk to me. And I'll do the same with you. Because you're not my little girl anymore. You're my equal. And I want you to see me like that, too."

His words helped to strengthen her resolve to help her sister, to fix her family, to help her friends find justice and peace. Makoto pulled away from him with a growing smile on her face, a shine to her eyes that reflected equally in her dad's.

"I promise, Dad." She nodded her head once, determined. Confident. And knowing someone would help her through the darkness. "We will get through this together. All of us."

He smiled at her and rubbed the top of her head like she was a child. She still felt proud, even if her face likely turned red at the physical praise. "Good. Now let's get home before your mother sends out a search party."

She figured hours ago that she wouldn't get any sleep that night. Her mind would be reeling. Her heart would be hammering.

But thanks to her dad's conviction, she had one of the best nights of sleep she had in a long time.

Chapter 123

Chapter 123

Minako wouldn't say she slept *terribly* , but she wouldn't say she slept well.

She let Akihiko take Makoto for a walk for two reasons: she wanted to know what was wrong with Makoto, and Akihiko seemed to think the same. And she wanted time to herself.

Akihiko was *furious* with her decision to ask Ren and his friends to go after Sae, but what more could they do for her? Time wasn't making her change back into the daughter she remembered. And the more she kept telling herself it was stress, it was work, it was her never-ending hatred for her father, Minako couldn't ignore the danger Sae was in.

Trying to reason with Akihiko was not going to go well, which is why she never said anything to him about her decision. Was it wrong of her? Probably. He loved Sae just as much as she did. But for months, Sae slipped further and further away, and she felt like it was her duty as a mother to bring her back, no matter the consequences.

Did that mean she wanted to put Sae in even *more* danger? No. She loved her daughter. She would rather sit and wait until Sae changed back on her own. But she made her choice, and she still believed it was the only way to *save* her. Not only that, but Mitsuru and her friends were going to be there to help. She trusted Ren and Makoto and personally saw the level of commitment from the other teens. Sae's safety was in good hands.

She may have lost track of time trying to preoccupy her mind with the crushing burden on her chest. Akihiko and Makoto scared her to death when they came home, but once she caught the look on their faces, she knew everything was going to be okay. Akihiko might hold some degree of animosity about going behind his back, but he also seemed to forgive her.

But her mind turned against her as she slept. She saw a shadow version of her daughter, laughing and attacking her family, then turning to her just as a shadow behind Sae attacked her and killed her. Or that Akechi showed up and shot and successfully killed Akihiko, Sae, and Makoto, then framed Ren and his friends for their deaths. Or that they had all planned and planned and had everything down to a T, but it did not go well for Sae. Which would have a rippling effect on Akihiko and Makoto, and herself.

It was a nightmare that would end, she would fall back asleep, then have it repeat all over again. At one point, she was sure she woke Akihiko, if he was even sleeping at all, but he said nothing to her. She did finally wake up curled against him, his arms wrapped around her like he was trying to comfort her through the night. Her heart warmed a degree when she realized he was fast asleep, something she didn't think she would see after she gave Sae's name to the Phantom Thieves.

When she tried to pull away from him, his eyes shot open and his arms held her tightly. A part of her worried he was waking from a possible nightmare, but when his eyes found hers, he brightened immediately. It took her breath away.

"Did I wake you?"

She shook her head with a muffled laugh. "No. I actually woke you up."

Instead of letting her sit up, or sitting up himself, he pulled her closer to him until her head rested on his chest. "I have plenty of time to catch up on any sleep I'll miss. I don't mind."

Minako was so happy to hear the confidence back in his voice, something that had been lacking for almost a month. She figured it would be rude to tell him she needed to start making breakfast, or to correct him because he would never be able to catch up on all of his missed hours of sleep, but she chose to simply lay in his arms. The minutes ticked by in silence. She was pretty sure she heard Makoto moving about the apartment, but she was also lulled back into a light sleep listening to Akihiko's heartbeat.

She only stirred when she felt his chest shake with a laugh. “We should probably get up. I know Mitsuru wants to speak with our group today, and if I lay in bed any longer, I’m not going to get up.”

That was when she pushed herself up off his chest and hovered over him. The blush on his face was immediate and his smile quickly vanished. “What? You think I’d let you be lazy all day?”

She laughed at him when he looked away and swallowed hard. “Um. N-No.”

Minako knew better than to keep teasing him, as light as it was, but the last thing she wanted was for Makoto to go to school with an empty stomach. Akihiko would also agree to that. But pushing herself away from him fully was much harder to do than she thought.

She leaned back down to kiss him when he heaved a sigh of relief. “Be grateful you woke up this early, or maybe you wouldn’t have gotten off so lucky.”

Being so playful with him after a night she thought he would snap at her made her heart do flips in her chest. It reminded her that they had already been through enough, and every time, they managed to come out stronger and better. While dealing with Sae may prove to be their hardest challenge, they would get through it. And if everything went as well as she was hoping it would, Sae would be back to them, too.

As she expected, Makoto was already moving about when Minako finally left the room. She was in the process of making a light breakfast, but she turned to Minako when she followed behind her into the kitchen. There was a shy look on Makoto’s face for the brief second she saw it, which piqued her curiosity about the previous night.

“I guess I should thank you,” Minako started, leaning back up against the counter. “Whatever you and your father talked about, it seems you both have gotten a lot off your chest.”

Makoto kept her eyes down to the pan on the stovetop. “Oh. Um. Y-Yes…”

Minako poked the fire. “You talk about your *boyfriend?”*

“N-No!” Makoto turned to face her, her eyes narrowed, her face growing red. “He just…he just wanted to reassure me that I wasn’t alone in this. B-Because…because I’m really worried…

It wasn’t the conversation she wanted to bring up or even dive into, but the look on Makoto’s face made her heart clench in her chest. “I know no matter what I say to you, or your father, you’re both going to worry. You’re going to worry right down till the last possible second. And I’m sorry for burdening you with this without talking it over with everyone first.”

When Makoto looked over at her again, Minako sighed heavily. “But I’m tired of Sae getting away with her actions. I’m tired of clinging to false hope. I’m tired of sitting here, waiting for her to change back, and she doesn’t. I *know* how to help her, and I trust you and your friends, as well as mine.”

She felt a weight being lifted off of her chest once the words were in the air. It was strange to be telling her own daughter this, but it felt *good* at the same time. Makoto seemed to sense her train of thought and offered a warm smile a second later.

“It’s nice, being able to hear you talk this way with me,” she told her. “Because maybe I’ve just been thinking of you and Dad as my parents and not as my friends. I don’t have to always worry about making you proud, or believing I need to be strong for you. Dad told me kind of the same thing last night, so I hope you know that I trust you, too.”

Minako never admitted to anyone that she always saw Makoto as her baby. Sae was the one she didn’t want to hold back in case it ruined their relationship. Sae was more of the strict mother figure to Makoto than she was. She knew when Sae got older, she was leaving, she would do her own thing, she wouldn’t *need* her.

Makoto, not so much. To see her with her back straight, supporting herself, and speaking with such pride and confidence, it pulled at her heart in ways she didn’t think it would. Makoto wasn’t so little. She had grown up right before her eyes. And while it scared her, thinking

about Makoto leaving the home with no other child to dote on, she was truly happy.

“I’m so proud of you, Makoto.” She had to lift a hand to wipe at her eyes, but she tried to make it quick to play off the real reason she was emotional. “I really do believe that you are, and have been, the link keeping this family together.”

The blush returned to Makoto’s face, which brought a smile to hers. “Um…”

Minako couldn’t resist the urge to reach out and hug her daughter tightly. “With your confidence and smarts, everything is going to be okay. I know it.”

Neither one of them said anything more as Makoto finished making her breakfast and Minako started prepping Akihiko’s coffee. It wasn’t too much longer before Akihiko came into the kitchen as well, likely from the smell of Makoto’s cooking and his coffee. That and he wasn’t one to stay in bed for too long after he woke up, even after his injuries.

But with the three of them sitting at the table, Minako almost broke down and cried again. Her family had been through so much hell for so long that even a calm and quiet breakfast was hard to come by. Akihiko had a brightness to him as he spoke to Makoto about why he liked having eggs for breakfast. (She may have zoned out to his words, but she *swore* he brought up protein). Makoto engaged in some other conversations with Akihiko, but Minako was too caught up in the *happiness* that nothing registered with her brain.

This. This is what she had always wanted. Not for a second. Not for a day. Forever. She just had to take the moments as they came.

She only hoped one day, they would include Sae again.

“I’ll look into him sometime today.”

Minako had no idea why she chose that moment to focus back on the conversation between Akihiko and Makoto, but she was interested to know *who* Akihiko had been talking about. She didn’t

say anything and watched Makoto nod her head and push her chair away from the table.

“Thank you, Dad.”

The conversation died then, but as soon as Makoto was out the door a few minutes later, Minako couldn’t contain her question. “Is Makoto asking you to do something for her?”

Akihiko’s eyes fell to her in surprise, but then he shook his head. “We’ve been working together trying to help a student at her school. She’s been hanging out with a guy I only know by reputation, and since I’m confined to a chair, I figured why not look into him?”

She smiled at him. Not only was he helping his daughter, he was helping another *child* . Someone who was probably rebellious and didn’t see the harm in hanging out with a well-mannered criminal. Even without the means to work like he had in the past, he was still trying.

She hadn’t expected to be so emotional today. “It’s so nice to see you back to normal again.”

He chuckled at her and turned in his seat to stand up. “When has life ever been normal?”

“I wouldn’t walk this road with any other man, that’s for sure.”

She was rewarded with a light blush before he turned away and hobbled over to the nearest couch. Mitsuru was supposed to be stopping by that morning with a few of the others, so she thought it was best to get to cleaning. Thankfully, there wasn’t too much to do, even with the fact that Akihiko was rendered immobile and Makoto had been more aloof than normal. Her happy and energized spirit began to fade the longer she was captive to the silence and her own mind.

What if Sae found out about them invading her subconscious? Would she know?

What if Sae found something else to go crazy over and they were too late to stop her wrath from affecting an innocent person?

What if Sae was too powerful an opponent and they lost?

What if they failed?

“Everything is going to be fine, Minako.”

Akihiko’s voice startled her. “Huh?”

She caught him dropping his eyes from hers to the phone in his hand. “Everything is going to be fine. Makoto isn’t a child anymore. Her friends are good people. And you know I’m not going to let anything bad happen.”

She knew it was wrong of her to doubt him, to doubt *all* of them, but a small part of her couldn’t help it. “You’re not worried at all?”

“Oh, I’m scared shitless, Minako,” he said as he lowered the phone in his hand. “But Mitsuru said something to me the night you asked Amamiya to go after Sae. She told me that it was *because* Sae was our daughter that everything would go well. Makoto reassured me last night. So now, I want to reassure you.” Then, he smiled at her. “Weren’t you the one who tried to tell me months ago that I needed to put more faith in her?”

He was right, even if she wanted to *punch* him for his smug attitude when she was not in the mood to joke around. Yet, it calmed her down tremendously. She fell into the seat she was standing in front of, but Akihiko wasn’t about to let her sit and stew on her own in her own space. He was quick to come sit beside her, reach for her hands, and hold them tightly.

“I know you’re afraid too, but like I told Makoto, take that fear and *do* something with it.” She looked over at him and was taken back by the seriousness on his face. It was the same look she had seen in Makoto moments before. “Nothing good will happen if you wallow in your fears. You’re not alone, Minako. Makoto and myself are just as terrified as you are. We understand. So let’s push forward. Together.”

She threw herself at him, wrapping her arms around his neck and burying her face in his chest. It was what she not only needed to

hear, but *wanted* to hear. The comforting promise that her daughter would be fine. Makoto would be fine. Akihiko would be fine. *She* would be fine.

They remained like that for what felt like hours, and Minako didn't mind. Akihiko didn't seem to mind either. Before she got *too* comfortable in his arms, she leaned back and did her best to give him an honest smile.

"Thank you, Aki." She leaned back into him and kissed him quickly, then forced herself to her feet. His words were her light. His promise was her hope. And if they were going to save their daughter, she had to pull her own weight, too. And a great way to clear her mind was to clean. After all, they were expecting company soon, and the last thing she wanted to tell her friends was that she was distracted and upset over something *she* instigated.

Akihiko returned his attention to his phone, but every now and then, she could feel his eyes on her. He was worried about her, but she knew better than to try and prove to him he had no reason to be. Most of the morning passed in silence, with a few random conversations happening when she felt too tense.

But finally, there was a knock on the door she had been waiting for. Minako glared at Akihiko when he tried to push himself off the couch to answer it, to which he shyly looked away and remained seated. She stopped behind where he was sitting, dropped a kiss to the top of his head, then walked off to open the door.

As she expected, Mitsuru and Fuuka were on the other side. Minako was curious to know where everyone else was, or who all would be stopping by, but Mitsuru held up her hand. "Most of them are out doing their jobs. However, Junpei and Yukari will be joining us shortly since Sae is under Aigis's surveillance."

Minako also figured it wouldn't be wise to have everyone meet at once in case someone really was keeping tabs on her and her family. "Well," she started, stepping aside to let the two women inside. "Come on in."

Mitsuru cracked a smile once she was inside the living room. "I can't

believe you're actually resting."

Minako felt a smile come to her face while Akihiko waved his hand, agitated. "Yeah, yeah. You said a week. And you know how much I love to prove people *wrong* ."

In his defense, it had already been a few days, which meant he had proved *her* wrong already, but Minako wouldn't admit that to him now. Fuuka giggled into her hand before she sat herself down on the couch beside where Akihiko was sitting.

"Are you going to make it to the end of the week?"

Minako sat in the space next to Akihiko and poked him in the stomach. "He's already struggling, and it's only been a few days. We'll see."

Mitsuru crossed her arms. "Two weeks, Akihiko. That's how long you'll be out. But don't forget, there's still other ways to help that don't require you to move around."

Akihiko groaned into one of his hands. "I'm going to go insane sitting behind a desk."

"We need more intelligence," Mitsuru replied with narrowing eyes. "You have your contacts. You have your leads. So follow them."

He knew better than to argue with her, but Minako was curious to know the secrets the two of them were hiding. Had that ultimately been why Akihiko was kidnapped and threatened in the first place? Because his investigations had led him to a criminal who didn't want to be caught?

But to terrify a man like Akihiko wasn't easy. "A-Are you going to be less secretive now?"

Both Mitsuru and Akihiko looked over at her, but Akihiko was the first one to break eye contact. He sighed deeply and pushed himself farther back into the couch. Minako turned to him fully, placing her hands on his forearm, and waited for him to answer her.

But Mitsuru stopped him. "I would prefer to wait until Yukari and

Junpei arrive so they are aware of the situation as well."

Thankfully, they didn't have to wait too much longer. It was funny actually, because Minako could *hear* Yukari and Junpei bickering before they even knocked on the door. Akihiko groaned in annoyance, but it made her heart lighter. They were all coming back to her, like they had been separated for only a year or two and not half of her life.

Mitsuru was the first one to speak when both of her friends were inside the apartment. "Both of you need to be more covert. I'm sure the entire complex knows you're here now."

Yukari only shrugged her shoulders and dropped down to the couch next to Minako.

Junpei did much the same and fell into the vacant chair in the room with a typical grin on his face. "Yeah, but Yuka-tan is *so* fun to annoy."

"I'll murder you."

Minako chuckled. Mitsuru was quick to put an end to the squabble. "Enough. We have much to discuss."

That was when Minako turned her attention back to Akihiko. He wouldn't look at her, but she knew he knew she was waiting for him to speak up.

Mitsuru had to pry him. "Akihiko."

He quickly ran a hand over his face while Minako braced herself. She wanted to know what he was doing that got him into so much trouble. But at the same time, she was worried. Whatever had scared him enough the other week was something that would probably terrify her even more.

"A while back, before these Phantom Thieves had taken out Kamoshida, I spoke to a reporter so she could write an article about his attacks the cops didn't want to investigate. And in return, she asked me to investigate a missing friend who had been looking into someone before she disappeared."

The room was oddly quiet, but tense. If he hesitated any longer, her heart was sure to explode in her chest.

“Masayoshi Shido.” The name meant nothing to her, but there was a change to Akihiko’s speech and breathing that made her blood run cold. “I didn’t really know what I was getting into at the time, but I’ve been trying to piece together a lot of what’s happening and he keeps coming up. I thought I was getting closer over time, but then he thought he would just come right up to me and confirm all of my worst fears.”

“He just…approached you?” Yukari asked, confused.

Minako didn’t need to hear Akihiko’s answer. Her hands clenched together on her lap, hearing for the first time the name of the man who tried to take Akihiko away from her.

“He kidnapped me.” There was a startled shock from Yukari and Junpei. “He threatened me. Told me that if I wanted my family to be safe, that I would end my investigation of him.”

“All of this started because of a reporter handing you his name?”

Akihiko paused before answering Junpei’s question. “Yeah. But I don’t think even she knew what all I would link to him.”

Mitsuru asked, “What all did he confess to?”

Minako reached over and grabbed one of his hands. The way he squeezed hers back made her tear up. “He knew about the Metaverse. He knew that killing someone’s shadow would force them to have a mental shutdown and possibly die from heart-attack like symptoms. And when Isshiki found out what he was doing, she wanted to go public with it, but he killed her before she could.”

Mitsuru sighed. “If this is true, then that would explain why her research vanished with her. And why he murdered her in front of her daughter, the only other person who may have known what Shido was doing.”

Akihiko gripped her hand tighter. “He has friends. His assassination attempts on my life started over year ago, before I even *knew* him.

He’s not alone, and he’s not a man to mess with.”

“And neither are we.”

The entire room looked over at her, but she was so *angry* that one person thought he could keep Akihiko silent. That one man thought he would get away with it because he knew Akihiko’s weaknesses. How *dare* this Shido bastard think he could do something so vile, then laugh and smile because he got underneath Akihiko’s skin.

Fuck him.

“We’re going to fight back. No man should ever make you feel the way you have. No man should be allowed to do as he pleases when it brings my family pain and suffering. If he wanted to win a battle, he should have known better than to mess with you, mess with my children, mess with *all* of us. He’ll regret it.”

The room was quiet again as she tried to force herself to calm down. Once her vision was back to normal and her thoughts not *murderous* , she caught the growing smile on Junpei’s face.

“Damn, Mina-tan. You sure as hell have the right attitude!”

She felt herself growing slightly embarrassed after coming to her senses, but the looks on her friends’ faces let her know that she was right. They were all going to fight back. They weren’t going to cower, even if their safety had been threatened. Just like they had done in the past, they would use their fears to grow stronger, more determined, and they would come out on top.

Just like they always did.

Chapter 124

Chapter 124

To say Makoto was nervous was an understatement.

Ren actually felt bad for her, staring at her phone in the student council room, waiting for a reply back from Akechi. The recently-again loved detective had earned the school's admiration and they had begged and pleaded with Makoto to let him be their guest speaker at the culture festival. Given everything she knew about him, Ren could only imagine the fear and concern and *impatience* going through her mind.

"The hell did we have to ask Akechi for?"

Makoto turned her attention to Ryuji and lowered her phone to the desk. "If we were to turn down such a popular request, then we would be scrutinized. And with the police showing up at random times, we need to keep as many eyes off of us as we can."

Haru leaned forward with an odd smile on her face. "We can also use this time to see how well he deals with the pressure of being interrogated by Shujin's best!"

Had the phone still been in her hands, Makoto would have fumbled it. "W-What?"

Ren had to laugh. "The fact he has yet to accept or decline means he's scared of what you'll do to him."

"Don't worry, Makoto!" Ann threw her seat back and came to stand beside the older girl. "You've got all of us on your side!"

And there was that precious blush he loved to see so much. "U-Um, t-thank you…"

"Why is having Akechi here gonna be a problem? He's just so effin' annoying."

Ren noticed the honest confusion on Ryuji's face, but he didn't want to reveal the truth to him. Or to the others, since they didn't know either. Unless they had figured it out on their own. Haru, maybe, but Ryuji and Ann hadn't been suspicious except that one moment at the TV station.

When Makoto lowered her eyes and avoided the question, Ren figured she needed someone to step in. "Do you remember that time back at the TV station, when Akechi heard Morgana's voice?"

Ryuji nodded. Ann nodded, too. Makoto cringed, but didn't speak up, so he continued. "Makoto's friends could only hear Morgana after they had been to the Metaverse. So Akechi has to have been to the Metaverse."

Ryuji looked confused for a second, but then the information sank in. "Oh…shit…"

"Are you thinking Akechi is the one who's entering the Metaverse and killing people?"

Haru, Ann, and Ryuji waited for him to answer, but before he could open his mouth, Makoto spoke up for him. "We have our doubts, but we should keep an open mind. While it's likely, we need more proof."

She was right, whether or not he *liked* it. There were millions of people living in Tokyo. How many more of them had the power that they didn't even know about?

But still. Mitsuru didn't seem like the type of person to waste time over *nothing* . And Sanada was a cop. A good one. There was more to Akechi than what Ren really wanted to believe. Deciding if that was him being a murderer or just annoying would take more time.

"I…I-I also want to say something…"

Ren was half tempted to rush over to where Makoto sat and pull her into him. Her voice was weak. Her face was sad. There was a mix of emotions flashing through her eyes before she lowered them.

Thankfully, Haru reached over and grabbed one of her hands sitting

on the desk. “It’s okay, Mako-chan.”

He also wondered if Makoto would kiss him or slap him if he called her *Mako-chan.* It was cute.

The thought vanished from his mind when Makoto took a deep breath, released it, and hung her head. “I want to tell you about my sister. Because I’ve known for a while about her palace, and I hid it all from you. I betrayed you all. And now, if we really do go after her, I have to come clean with all of you.”

While the room was quiet, Ren only wanted to reach out and reassure her that everything was okay. No one was judging her or hating her or thinking anything less of her. But he didn’t, because she looked back up and her eyes were burning like she was finally ready to face those demons she had kept hidden behind her façade.

“My sister and I had to lie about our parents since we were old enough to know why. While I didn’t have a problem with it, my sister did. She hated my dad for being afraid of a criminal and not showing up to her aikido tournaments and school events. She hated having to have a different last name. She hated feeling like she wasn’t a part of the family. And that hatred only grew more intense as the years went by.”

He saw Haru’s hold on Makoto’s hand tighten. Ann reached over and placed her hand on top of the other girl’s. Ren was relieved to know that they were supporting her when she needed it, yet disappointed it couldn’t be *him* .

“Sis likes to use her hatred to win her cases, so that one day she can rub it in my dad’s face as proof he should never have abandoned her. As I got older, I could understand some of her anger, but I love my dad. He’s been through so much to keep her out of trouble when she goes off in a rage. She’s arrested him, watched him get beaten, did *nothing* when he was kidnapped recently.”

They all gave her a minute to catch her breath and calm down. It hurt seeing her so upset about something out of her hands.

“But my mother is right. I can’t keep sitting here waiting for Sis to get better. She’s not. She’s going to get worse. And if she’s in danger, then it’s my duty to save her. And I will. Because I have all of you.”

Ren tried to contain his smile in front of the others, but he couldn’t. That fire in her eyes would never fail to make his mind go blank and his heart pound loudly in his chest. Even with the circumstances that brought that fire to life, she was still so beautiful.

“You’re so brave, Mako-chan.” Haru’s smile became even more proud, her eyes sparkling with happiness. “It’s hard, having to make a stand against family, but we will all be right here for you.”

Ann nodded her head with a smile of her own. “You can count on us, Makoto! We won’t let you down!”

“Dude, I still can’t believe you’re Sanada’s *daughter* …”

“You look a lot like your mom,” Haru added.

“I’m glad we’ve got your trust, Makoto,” Morgana said with excitement in his tone. “You’ve been a great asset and friend to this team! We’re going to help you!”

Makoto’s eyes landed on him, but his words were caught in the back of his throat. He really wanted to hold her, and maybe kiss her, and tell her over and over that he was proud of her and happy to see the light in her eyes. To tell her that even though she had come a long way since they first met, he had always been able to count on her.

And now, it was his turn to be there for her.

Thankfully, Makoto caught his inability to speak as an overwhelming moment of pride and looked away from him with a smile and a light blush. Sadly for him, Ann and Haru both caught it and eyed him curiously.

Neither of them commented, but Ren knew from their looks that they *knew* .

“Well,” Haru said, pushing her seat back with a devious smile. “We should all head home and get some rest. Tomorrow will be a day

filled with fun and excitement!”

Makoto’s smile turned into a frown, but Ren was also eager to have some more *space* to tell her how he really felt about her determination. He would turn that frown into a smile again.

But Ryuji had to get one last question in. “W-Woah! W-Wait! So…so if Akechi’s the bad guy…d-did he try and kill Sanada?!”

Ren would have smacked him had he been close enough. At the moment, no one else knew about that night except Makoto, Ryuji, Morgana, and him. With the question in the open, he worried Makoto would panic and withdraw again.

She didn’t. In fact, she seemed to take his comment well *and* took Ryuji’s relationship with her father into consideration. “We don’t know that for sure. They work together very rarely, so there’s no real motive for Akechi to go after him.”

She was lying, but Ryuji didn’t need to know that. Yet. And it seemed to calm him down just enough to keep him from rushing out and searching for Akechi himself. Ren knew if Makoto had been more honest about their doubts and *why* they thought Akechi was the culprit, Ryuji would make a scene the next time he saw him. The last thing they needed right now was to have Akechi grow even more suspicious about their group.

To keep the questions from being asked, Ren pushed his chair back and stood up. “Haru is right. We should get some rest. We have a lot to work on the next few days, so we all need to be at our best.”

Everyone nodded their heads in agreement, then each of them said their goodbyes and walked out of the room. Haru *and* Ann winked at him when they realized he was staying behind to wait for Makoto to straighten up the room. He didn’t want to admit that both girls walked away with a smile because *he* was blushing.

He quickly snapped back to attention when he felt Makoto’s hand on his arm. When he looked over at her, her eyes remained on his for a second before she turned her head. It brought a chuckle out of his throat.

“You’re really cute, you know that?”

She turned away even farther. “S-Stop…”

“And you’re really strong, being able to keep yourself so focused and thinking of others when you’re worried.”

She exhaled and the blush was gone. Her cute little smile was gone. He felt bad for bringing it all back up. He almost apologized for it, then she looked back over at him before the words could come out.

“I am worried. I’m scared. I don’t want to fight my sister. But I will. Because I love her, and she would do the same for me if I was out of control and knew how to help me.”

Her eyes burned with that previous determination that made him stand there looking like a fool. It was starting to be a common reaction when she would look at him with fire in her eyes. Especially recently. Given what she had to be dealing with in terms of her own feelings for her family, she also knew how to balance school and their friends’ feelings as well.

That required a lot of heart, a lot of strength, and a lot of patience and understanding. She had it all. Perfectly. Beautifully.

And thanks to that, and the reemergence of the dusting on her cheeks in his silence, he felt *obligated* to kiss her. He sure as hell wasn’t one to keep quiet for too long, but that was the effect she had on him. He didn’t hate it, because it meant he could show his appreciation for her in *other* ways.

Makoto clearly hadn’t been expecting him to lean in and kiss her, so it didn’t last long at all. However, she didn’t really pull away when he rested his head against hers, trying again to find the words he hadn’t been able to tell her before.

Then she chuckled and smiled at him and he knew he wasn’t ever going to be able to say anything to her now. There was a change in her eyes, too, and he was suddenly grateful they were still at school and not in his *room* or things could have…escalated…

“I’m really glad I got to meet you, Ren.” Her words were softly

spoken, but he heard it powerfully enough. “I think it’s because of you that I feel like everything will be okay in the end.”

He slid his hand under her chin to look back into her eyes. “I would face a million charges for the chance to keep you in my life.”

The second he caught her eyes lower to his lips, he finished her thought for her. His hand on her chin moved to the back of her neck and into her hair. Her hair was soft and pretty, just like he remembered from when he had coaxed her to sleep. But that thought was only in his head for half a second. He never really thought Makoto would be the kind of girl who would be okay with a relatively heated kiss in a semi-public place. Not that he was *complaining* , since his brain couldn’t really work right anyway, but he lost his ground when she completely closed the distance between their bodies.

He actually choked on his breath and tumbled backwards until his back was against a wall. It wasn’t enough of a push back that he released her, but it was enough that she realized what she had done and pulled back in a panic.

“I-I…I’m so sorry!”

He laughed at her reaction because it was so Makoto. Cute. Shy. But instead of commenting on it like he had done a million times in the past, he pulled her back into him. Makoto wasn’t ready for it, but after a second to recover, she didn’t push away from him.

“I’m not sorry,” was all he said to her before he resumed where they had left off a moment ago. He couldn’t really say he knew what he was doing, but for the most part, he simply copied whatever Makoto was doing. Her hands were in his hair; his hands were in hers. He broke away for a second to breathe, she would start the kiss again, and vice versa. A few times, he met her lips with an open mouth, eager to see what she would do, but too intimidated to do anything himself.

When her hands left his hair to move along his shoulders and to his chest, that small part of his brain that kept him *reserved* shut down. One of his hands moved from her hair to the base of her neck to pull

her into him more. He took the opportunity of those open mouthed kisses and reached out with his tongue to taste even more of her. Both of his hands slid down her back to her hips, pulling her as close as he could get her.

He wanted to take off his blazer, but at the same time, he didn't want to stop what was happening for him to *cool off* .

Then, there was a beeping noise from his pocket that ripped through his body like he was struck by lightning. Ren wouldn't say he *pushed* Makoto off of him, but he was probably more forceful than he should have been. The surprise in her eyes quickly changed to fear, and her back was to him before he could apologize for his actions.

She likely needed her space, as he did, so he chose that moment to look at his phone. It was a message from an unknown person, but when he opened the text, he saw it was from Mitsuru.

If you have the chance today, I would like to meet with you one on one.

Mitsuru didn't strike him as someone who would purposely set him up, or interrogate him alone, but he was still intimidated. However, he was also relieved. His mind was not in the spot it needed to be at to be *helpful* , so he greatly welcomed the diversion.

Not that he wanted Makoto to think he was now *afraid* of her, but things could have gone south fast had his phone not gone off. Or if they really were at his place, or hell, even *hers* .

Telling her as much wasn't as easy as he wanted it to be. "Um, I'm really sorry, Makoto."

Her shoulders lifted with her inhale. He was worried she was going to turn around and slap him, or yell at him, or worse, *cry* .

But once again, she took him by surprise. She turned to him with a bright red face, her eyes unable to look up at him. "N-No…I…I'm sorry. I-I know we've, um…t-talked about this before…s-so I should have…s-stopped it…"

It brought a smile to his face. "I think I can admit that was super hot

though."

She covered her burning face with her hands. "R-Ren!"

He took two steps to stand in front of her, then lifted his arms to hug her. "I'm sorry, too. Even if I really enjoyed it, but…let's just not go any further right now, okay?"

Likely unable to form words, he felt her nod against his chest. It was a relief, because as *wonderful* as their little make-out session had been, if that was what he could call it, it was dangerous. He would have done whatever she asked him to do, or wouldn't have *stopped* unless she asked him to. He believed she thought much the same.

It wasn't at all how he anticipated *that* going. At school. After a meeting. After knowing Makoto for not even a full year yet.

He still thoroughly enjoyed it.

"Your friend Mitsuru said she wanted to speak to me, one on one."

That got Makoto to lean her head back to look up at him, confused. "W-Why?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. For more information, maybe?"

Makoto turned back into the cute thinker. Her hand rested against her chin and she looked so deep in thought. She was still cuddled in his arms. He almost kissed her again, but thought better of it and kissed the top of her head.

"It's no big deal," he told her. "You trust her. And if it helps for the future, I want to help."

She at least nodded her head, but he didn't think it erased her doubts and questions. She didn't say anything else about it, so he figured it would be a good time to respond to Mitsuru and ask where she wanted him to meet her.

I have to drop Makoto off at home, then I can meet wherever you want me to.

Ren was impressed at the speed in which she replied. *Akihiko will pick her up if you're leaving. I can meet you at Leblanc.*

The fact that Makoto's *father* was going to be waiting outside of the school after what had happened almost made him drop his phone and leave the country. Makoto noticed, turning slightly in his arms to allow one of them to drop to his side.

"I-Is everything okay?"

Her concern was touching, and he couldn't help the smirk that came to his face. "Yeah, um…she told me your dad is supposed to pick you up and I'm kind of worried for my life right now."

He was taken back when she chuckled and leaned back into his chest. "He won't know unless you tell him."

Ren didn't think he could even be in the same space as Sanada and not have him pick up on his body language. Then, he was a dead man.

"But we should probably get going," she said, pulling out of his arms fully. "I would hate for my dad to murder you because you kept me here too late."

Her smirk only made him that much more nervous about *leaving* with her when the others had left almost half an hour ago. But he had to at this point. And he made a point to keep his mouth shut and hands to himself and prepare to bolt if Sanada *looked* at him.

To his heart's relief, when they both stepped outside the school, Sanada wasn't waiting for them.

Minako was. And her friend from the day before, Yukari. "Oh. What were you two *studying?"*

Suddenly, Ren didn't know which of her parents he was more afraid of.

"Mom!"

"Staying pretty late, just the two of you, huh?"

He could practically *feel* the heat coming off of Makoto's face. "W-We had a meeting!"

Minako grinned devilishly. "Sure you did."

"Ah, to be young again."

Makoto didn't say anything and grabbed her mom's arm and started walking off. He was sad he didn't get a goodbye, but at this point, he just wanted to *breathe* .

"For someone with a criminal background, you sure are a cute kid."

Minako's friend chuckled at him when he fell silent to her comment. "Mitsuru wants to meet you, and as of right now, it's not safe to be alone. Which is why I'm escorting you."

He didn't know enough about the woman to know if that was a good thing or a bad thing. He assumed that if Minako trusted her and Mitsuru trusted her, then all would be fine. But if this was Minako's friend, then he was worried the teasing would continue on without her.

He felt oddly uncomfortable, which she picked up on. "I'm not going to hurt you." She chuckled again. "I'm still trying to wrap my head around everything that's happened. So don't mind me."

Ren thought it would be a good idea to get to know her a little, but he had no idea how to go about asking her a question. He was curious to know about her time on Minako's team, if she could still fight, how she came to know everyone. All the types of questions he couldn't really ask in public.

The train ride back to Leblanc was long and weird, but Yukari at least tried to make him more comfortable around her. She had asked about his hometown, told him that she had come from a coastal town as well, then told him that she had been out to Odawara Castle several times.

It was kind of nice talking about random topics with someone he didn't really know. Yukari actually seemed like she had experience in travelling, which meant she had knowledge about all sorts of

things he had only read in books. Ren was a little bit sad when they reached the coffee shop, but Yukari held out her hand before he stepped inside.

“It was nice chatting with you. I’m sure we’ll be seeing each other a bit more often, but if you need anything or feel like something’s wrong, you can talk to any of us.”

The promise was appreciated. He reached out and shook her hand. “I enjoyed talking with you, too.”

She smiled and waved to him. “Can’t say I’m a big coffee drinker, but Minako says you make some good stuff. I’ll have to try some of it one day.”

He was glad she walked off before the blush came to his face. But then he was happy, knowing that he had met such a bizarre fate that would lead him to find wonderful people. It was going to be hard to have to leave, when before, he was eager to return home.

This was his home now.

Ren opened the door and stepped inside the shop to find Sojiro speaking to Mitsuru at the far end of the bar. They both looked over at him when he was inside, then Mitsuru nodded her head at him.

“I apologize for asking to take a moment of your time, but I assure you it will be quick.”

The way she spoke to him seemed a little too formal for his liking, but he wasn’t about to tell her to stop and offend her. “It’s not a problem.”

She reached into her bag on the adjacent chair and pulled out her phone. She held it up to him, which was when he noticed the strange Metaverse app. He turned his eyes back to hers, but instead of a confused look on her face, she wore a smirk that he didn’t know how to take.

“I would like you to tell me where to take my team so we can begin our training.”

Chapter 125

Chapter 125

Akihiko was irritated.

He was sitting at home, being *good* , when Mitsuru had asked him to pick up his daughter after class. Minako refused to let him out, warning him he had to *rest* , then left on her own. It wouldn't have been too big of a deal, but he knew *why* Mitsuru had to speak to Amamiya that day.

They were all going to the Metaverse to *train* . And *he* was not allowed to go.

That angered him.

How was he supposed to be useful if he didn't train, too? Hell, he had been *resting* long enough that he could walk without his support, so he could at least *go* with them. When he told Mitsuru as much the day before, she, of course, slapped him with files of papers and told him to get to work on their intelligence.

"I know you want to go with us, Akihiko, but I can trust you in a fight with your instincts. The others need to get used to this again. And we're still far from the truth. So get to work."

He figured Mitsuru was trying to brush him off by giving him a new purpose, and she did it successfully. Fuuka had given him a file as well, showing him how to access locked databases without getting caught. He didn't know how he felt about *hacking* , but he had always been curious about it. And Fuuka's files were well-written and simplified for him, so it would be rude not to put the tips to use.

So he sat down and got to work. Even with Fuuka's notes, he knew he needed to do some organizing beforehand. He took everything he could find that he had compiled over the months, everything that had to do with Shido or the Phantom Thieves or the mental shutdowns, and planted himself at his desk. It would take some time

to organize his thoughts, but it felt good to be sitting down at his desk and working again.

Akihiko first started with the initial information Fuuka had given to him about Shido months ago. Knowing he was looking for links to the mental shutdowns, his notes suddenly made more sense. One of the key things from Fuuka's digging had been that Shido was not well liked amongst several political members.

Those political members were either *dead* or forced to retire because of a mental shutdown.

Anyone who spoke out against Shido or tried to undermine him were silenced. Then, they were replaced with people Shido likely picked himself.

It wasn't enough to spark the attention of the public, but it was the start Akihiko wished he could have realized months ago. It had all happened before Kamoshida and the first mention of the Phantom Thieves. It was before Amamiya had even been in the city. Which meant that the Phantom Thieves could not be the ones behind the mental shutdowns. It would be a wonderful piece of information that he wished he could tell Sae…

Akihiko wondered if Ohya's friend had caught wind of the connections and Shido or his underlings found out. It was also interesting to know why the media wouldn't want that kind of dirt on a promising politician when that was *everything* they wanted. Ohya had to be secretive about the incident, almost like her coworkers and superiors were trying to keep *her* quiet.

He would want to talk to her again for the answer. Because if her bosses had ties to Shido, that would explain *how* they knew Murakami was investigating Shido, nothing was ever released to the public, and she went missing without anyone caring.

Then he thought of his own bosses. Masami was murdered, suffering a mental shutdown, but no one ever knew. How in the hell did Shido or Akechi or the millions of eyes know they were going to be speaking to Masami? And how did they know he was going to rat them out? Akihiko knew Masami was someone who only cared

about himself, and he had been terrified to have to come clean with them.

“You wouldn’t want to know if you knew who they were.”

Their timing was a little *too* perfect to be pure coincidental. But their plan had been executed perfectly. Akihiko had no idea when things would have gone wrong, or when someone tipped the wrong person off and that information reached Shido and he contacted the right people to silence Masami.

Several things hit him the next second. Shido told him in the back of his car that he knew about Akihiko’s trip to the beach with *his wife* . Yukari had been there, too, but not nearly as personable with him as Minako was. By then, their plan to interrogate Masami had been planned out. But Masami wouldn’t have known who he would be meeting because it was only the words, *his wife,* that caught his attention. It wouldn’t have been until he was face to face with Yukari that he would have known he was set up.

Unless word had gotten back to Shido that Masami had fallen for the ruse and Minako was safe at home…

Akechi would have known it was a trap. Minako had spoken to him about Akihiko’s almost successful mental shutdown. How the teen would have known it wasn’t Minako that had been “kidnapped” to lure in Masami, he would likely never know, or *want* to know. Worst-case scenario, Masami was expendable, so even if they didn’t really *know* what he had walked into, they had planned to kill him long before his teams’ plot to trap him. They just gave the enemy the perfect chance to pin the entire thing on *him* since everyone would have known he would have been in contact with Masami that day.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Akihiko doubted that Masami was killed when he was because they just wanted him gone that particular day. They could have killed him off whenever they wanted, but they didn’t. They waited until *he* was able to take the fall for his boss’s death.

But…they arrested him and tried to beat him into submission rather than make the death public and lock him up in jail. Not only that,

they tested Sae's loyalties as well. The autopsy report, although likely forged, or the body not even looked at, would have been the nail in his coffin. Yet, nothing was ever done. Mitsuru's powers were *not* what let him walk free, and he was terrified to think that maybe that had been their plan all along.

Akihiko leaned back in his chair. How far did this corruption go? And how many of them actually worked for Shido, and how many of them were just intimidated by those who did?

His mind went straight to Sae. They were turning her into one of *them,* he could see that. Shido even said it himself, that whenever Sae started to catch on to something happening and ask questions, he just had to remind her of who she was, and her anger pushed her back on the path they wanted her to stay on. That also meant the director was likely a pawn, since that was who Sae had to take the majority of her orders from.

And Akechi. He was likely assigned to be Sae's little *guard dog* to keep tabs on her. Even if Shido didn't know she was his daughter at the time, her anger was a reason to pull her to their side. She joined their army and fell into their scheme without her even *knowing* , and if she began to wonder off, Akechi gave her something to distract her. He *did* have information about Isshiki that led Sae straight to Sakura. And who better to send than an overzealous prosecutor who had no idea what she was getting into?

Mitsuru hadn't even known there was a connection at the time.

He was suddenly grateful for Minako's decision to ask Amamiya to change Sae's heart. The longer she was allowed to fall victim to her superiors who were *using* her, the harder it would be for him to convince her of the danger she was in before it was too late to save her. He did notice a slight change in her the other day when Minako handcuffed her to him. Hopefully now, Sae was a little more *aware* of her surroundings and *hopefully* would tell him when something didn't feel right.

He knew the look in her eyes when she walked away that day. She knew something was wrong, and despite her hatred for him, she took his information seriously. Which was wonderful. It proved that

she was still there, that she trusted him, that she would really be okay after the Phantom Thieves did their job…

Akihiko shook his head to keep himself focused. He needed to find that missing link between Akechi and Shido, assuming the teen was the black mask hitman that had created the mental shutdowns. Mitsuru had told him that she thought they knew each other rather well…

There was no evidence, but if Shido had caught wind of Akechi's powers while working with Isshiki, it would be the missing link. It would still be hard to prove, because why would Shido want to put blind faith in a teenager? Why would Akechi want to work with Shido? And why would the teen want to *kill* for a man he didn't even really know?

A child would always want to impress someone. He had learned that much by working with so many castaway children. And Akechi was someone he greatly underestimated. Teenagers were impossible to figure out. They were easily manipulated, but desperate for attention from whoever gave it the most while trying to find their place in life. A little sweet talk at a young age likely set Akechi in one direction instead of the other.

He needed to look into Akechi's mother. If her death was that turning point, the moment Akechi *cracked* , then Akihiko could see him killing to get back at people who had everything when he had lost it all.

Was this about his missing father, maybe? Someone who maybe abandoned him? Could Shido have promised him a chance to go after the father Akechi never got to have, but had to prove himself first? Shido was playing a very dangerous game if that were the case, considering Akechi could have pulled the trigger on him when his back was turned.

…Would *Shido* have a palace?

Akihiko figured it might be a good idea to speak to Akechi personally again to talk *family* . It would be hard, and he had to be smart, but he knew how to pick up on the little signs that Akechi probably didn't

know how to hide well enough. He would have to think of the consequences, however. Akechi was already dangerous, likely knew that Sae had a palace, or could easily find out, and he could push him into killing his daughter. Maybe once Sae was safe, he would sit down with the teen and get the truth.

For now, he would talk to Ohya about any new leads and look into Akechi's background. Since he wasn't allowed to go anywhere, he figured the best place to start was with Akechi. He started with a simple search first, curious to see what kind of information was public. He learned nothing impressive, the searches all related to the Phantom Thief cases, his schooling, how well-liked he was. Some of them mentioned how he was the popular "Teenage Detective," but then never listed any cases he had worked on or solved or who he worked *with* . It was like the title was *given* rather than *earned.*

Just like a lot of other people Shido had been close with.

That was where the basic searches ended. There was nothing about Shido, nothing about his mother, nothing about that time period in his life. Akechi didn't even *exist* until he was in high school. But yet, no one really seemed to care or find that *odd* . Granted this was his first time looking into Akechi, but it made him wonder how many people even tried to look into him at one point and then maybe were "punished" for it.

Like his partner.

If only Akihiko had questioned him more often about what he was doing so late into the night, maybe Shido would have never killed anyone. His partner had no idea about the supernatural world he was aware of. That kind of mind-blowing information would have created doubts to those who didn't know. But Akihiko did. And he could have helped if he had reached out just *once.*

It was too late to be thinking like that, so Akihiko shook his head and told himself to focus on what he could do *now* . If he could somehow find his partner's case files, that might have exactly what he was looking for. It was a long shot, and he couldn't show up at the station and ask too many questions with so many untrustworthy people about. So he reached for the file that Fuuka had given him to start

digging deeper into Akechi's past, his mother, the missing *link* .

Sadly, he didn't get too far into Fuuka's notes before he heard a knock on the door. "Dad?"

Akihiko closed the file and threw his notes underneath the folder as Makoto opened the door and stepped into the room. He turned to her as she sighed in relief. "Mom was worried you might have snuck out without anyone here to stop you."

It made him chuckle. "Can't say I wasn't tempted." Then, he asked her, "Where is your mother?"

He figured that if anyone was going to check up on him, it would have been Minako. But the longer he watched Makoto stand in silence, never making eye contact with him, he began to grow curious. Had she come home with a surprise? A *good* surprise?

"Makoto?"

When her face fell, Akihiko's curiosity turned into dread. "I'm not supposed to tell you."

"Why not?"

"B-Because…" He waited in her silence, hoping that his intense staring would get her to come clean with him. "D-Don't tell her I told you…o-okay?"

Minako hadn't come home with a surprise. He knew that based on the way Makoto held herself. "O-Okay?"

"She went with Mitsuru to the Metaverse."

Great. So now *Minako* went without him. Makoto held her hands up in front of her, as if to calm the spark of anger that was starting to surface. "She said going again might help her. Maybe she can learn something and get her powers back…"

He wasn't going to take his anger out on his daughter, but he was still upset. What if the same thing happened to Minako that happened before? What if she got hurt? Granted she was with

friends, and he doubted Mitsuru would venture too far off into that strange world with their veteran-turned-rookie group…

“This is her way to try and help Sis,” Makoto said, almost as a whisper. “And I know you’re strong and you know how to fight there. So you have to get better and spend your time doing something different, but just as important.”

Sometimes, he loved watching his daughter speak with so much strength and conviction. But sometimes, it frustrated him. Especially since she was right. The others knew very little about the Metaverse, but he had been a few times already. Why Mitsuru wanted the rest of them to be more aware and *train* , he could ask later, but for now, he knew enough. He had summoned Caesar before. He had been to Sae’s palace. He had a vague idea of how the Phantom Thieves operated.

What he worried about the most was that Minako would be so headstrong about finding her answers, about finding the truth about what had happened to her, and wander off on her own and get hurt.

Makoto sensed his concern and walked up to stand next to where he sat. “Mitsuru won’t let anything bad happen to Mom. And Mom told me that she would stay with the group. She’ll be okay.”

It really didn’t make him worry any less.

“So. What are you looking into?”

Akihiko jolted back to reality when Makoto moved around him to look at the files on his desk. She didn’t open any of them, which he was thankful for, but he knew she wanted to know more. “Snooping around is a good way to get yourself killed, Makoto.”

She waved him off. “You won’t kill me.”

“That’s pretty bold of you to assume that.”

Makoto chuckled before looking over at him again. “You *were* pretty upset with me when I told you I went through your notes to find Kaneshiro’s name.”

Now that she brought it up, he was *still* a little upset with her. And himself. If he would have hid his notes better, or locked them up, Makoto never would have found out about Kaneshiro and gotten herself kidnapped. He wouldn't have been shot. Two other teenagers wouldn't have been involved with the mafia.

Which led him to ask, "How did you know he was the one you were looking for?"

Her hands came together in front of her and her head fell to her chest. "If I'm being honest, I-I just g-guessed. I only knew you were working in Shibuya, and the students were threatened in Shibuya. I thought you would know, and his name was circled, so I…I made the assumption he was the bad guy."

He didn't know whether to pride her instincts or scold her for not talking to him first. The look on her face was sympathetic, so he figured she was punishing herself enough. "And from there, you just…ran off to speak to him?"

Her head remained lowered. "I went to tell the Phantom Thieves, since I was the one asking them to change the heart of the one scamming the students. I wanted to know if they were just, or if they were only seeking fame."

At some point, he thought Makoto had simply dropped Kaneshiro's name to Amamiya and he did his thing. And she followed him around and got into trouble that way, since she was a *terrible* spy. Now, it seemed like she brought Kaneshiro to them. But, "Why were you so motivated to go after a known mafia boss?" He hung his head with a sigh. "You put them, and yourself, in grave danger. Did you not think about that?"

Makoto didn't answer right away. He caught typical signs of nervousness, anger, frustration, and maybe some regret. Then, her eyes met his, and he didn't know what to expect. "The principal wanted information on the Phantom Thieves or he was going to talk to your bosses and get you fired for good."

The comment didn't register for the longest time. "W-Wait… *what?"*

She lowered herself to the edge of the bed, but her eyes remained burning with fire, as if she was angry about something. “After Kamoshida, he started hounding me for information, since it was likely they were students at school. Ren had been a little too confident that Kamoshida was going down, but I never believed him. And then Kamoshida came into school weeping and apologetic. I figured Ren knew details about it, so I followed him around to find them.”

“That was why you were stalking him?”

Her face turned a bright shade of pink. “W-Well…a-at first, I was just curious to know his routine and how he found time to do anything criminal against a man like Kamoshida. But after Madarame confessed on live TV, the principal threatened your job, and I took that personally. I didn’t want to see you, someone who did the right thing for *nothing,* get punished for a group of kids who wanted attention.”

Akihiko ran his hands through his hair. He was touched with her resolve, but so many things could have gone wrong for her. “Why didn’t you tell me this? And why did you believe him?”

“It was right after you got in trouble and had been transferred. He also planned to use your aggression against Kamoshida against you. I didn’t want you to get in any more trouble, especially since you and Mom were struggling.”

He sighed deeply. “So why didn’t you tell me?”

She took a deep breath. “Because I didn’t want to keep running home and crying to you about every little thing that pushed me up against a wall. I *had* to learn how to fight back on my own, or I would never make it in the world. And…and when you cornered me about following Ren around, I may have used that anger to find those answers on my own.”

He didn’t know what to think at this point. He had expected Makoto to tell him some simple story about hearing he had some information about this mafia boss, and then she took that name to the Phantom Thieves and asked to join. He sure as hell didn’t think there was

more to that story. Especially being *blackmailed* .

But then something else hit him.

Was the *principal* involved in the grand corruption scheme? He had been ridiculously protective of Kamoshida. He demanded answers about the Phantom Thieves long before the public was really interested. Perhaps he was the weak informant that came at the right place and the right time. A lacky. Disposable.

Hadn't he died right in front of the police station? How did he die?

"It might be strange to hear, but I'm not sorry." He shot his attention back to Makoto, who had that flare back in her eyes again. "Had I not pursued Kaneshiro on my own, I may be a completely different person now. I wouldn't feel like I am strong and independent. I wouldn't feel like you were my friend, but just my dad who laid down the law. I wished it could have been under different circumstances. I never wanted you to get hurt. But you've also shown me your strength, and it helps me believe in myself. I believe in my friends. And I believe in all of us."

Her strength was admirable, and he could appreciate that. She took the worst of situations and saw the positive. Not only that, she didn't let her terrible mistakes hold her back and became much stronger. He could see a lot of Minako in her, and he could also see a lot of himself.

Thanks to that, he smiled brightly at her. "I can't say I approve of your decision to go after Kaneshiro on your own, but I see how it shaped you. And if you're proud of the direction you took your life, then so am I. Just," he said with a light laugh. "Just don't go after a criminal like that again, without me."

Makoto nodded her head and returned his smile with one of her own. "I won't. Because I want to learn from you."

And he could learn from her as well. In fact, her story had brought to light more troubling details about the case he was currently looking into. If her principal really did know about Shido or his corruption, or had been involved on some level, perhaps he left some evidence

behind.

“Then I want to assign you your first solo mission.”

Makoto jumped off the bed a second later, her eyes glowing and her smile widening. “You do?”

It was a little harder to stand up himself, having been sitting for so long, but once he was on his feet, he nodded to her. “You said the principal was the one who asked you to look into the Phantom Thieves. And he died right before he would have brought information to the police. Meaning he likely has something to hide about what I’m looking into.”

Her smile never faded. Her eyes never dimmed. She continued to stand at the ready, eager for the mission he would assign her. It made him stumble for a second, seeing his little girl as one of the police cadets that he had trained with years ago. But he trusted her. She had good judgment. And now, she knew she could talk to him about anything.

“I want you to go into his office and find anything you can that has nothing to do with his job as an administrator.”

There was a look of confusion on her face. “O-Okay?”

Akihiko didn’t want to come out and tell Makoto the whole story about Shido, Akechi, all of those he thought were in on the same conspiracy. But he also knew that in order for Makoto to look for the right information, she *had* to know, to some degree.

“I’m looking into a conspiracy that involves some pretty important people. I believe they are the ones who have framed you and your friends. Okumura may have been involved. And if the principal was as well, I’m hoping he at least left something behind to help us build our case.”

She took her seat back on the bed. “You think Akechi is part of this group?”

He nodded slowly. “I do. I just can’t prove his motive for being pulled in.”

“Who else is involved?”

“Look,” he said with a sigh. “I don’t want you to think all of these people are guilty. I could very well be wrong. Akechi is up to something at least. Various others have some serious questions to answer. But no matter how hard I try and disprove it, there’s always one man who seems to be behind everything.”

“Who?”

He hesitated. He held her eyes for a second or two before he looked away. He never answered her.

“Dad.” She waited until he finally looked back over at her. “Is this the same person who kidnapped you?”

Akihiko had a hard time admitting the truth to Minako, to their friends. The *last* thing he wanted to do was tell his *daughter* . However, if she was going to be open and honest with him, he had to do the same. So, he swallowed his dread and took a deep breath.

“Masayoshi Shido. He’s supposedly running for Prime Minister. I originally looked into him at the request of an acquaintance, and ever since, his name keeps coming back up. That, and he confessed to things I thought he was guilty of when I was forced to meet with him. He used you, your sister, and your mother’s safety to keep me quiet, and truth be told, I’m still nervous as hell.”

He let his words hang in the air while he tried to find his ground again. A part of him was worried that now Makoto knew, she would try and go after him herself. She would only look for incriminating evidence about Shido and nothing else.

Not that Shido’s confession wasn’t incriminating enough, but trying to prove it without the hundreds of other “friends” in custody would be difficult.

So, he added, “Rule number six, never allow yourself to become narrow minded. You can’t zone in on one person. You have to keep an open mind. Part of the reason I didn’t want to tell you a name was because I worry you’re going to focus too much on him when I

could be completely wrong."

Her eyes narrowed at him. "You just said he confessed to things you thought he was guilty of."

"I did," he replied with a nod. "But now I have to prove it to the public. To people who admire him. And with his army seemingly everywhere, I have to be careful. The only reason I'm even asking you to search the principal's office is because you're student council president and no one would blink twice if you remained late after school one day, or if they caught you in his office."

Makoto leaned forward, trying to grasp the situation, but still very confused. She was young, a little *too* young yet to understand the terrors of the human race. He wished he could have kept it from her for a few more years yet.

"Alright." She once again pushed herself to her feet. "If you promise to keep resting, I will do what I can. If, of course, I can ask a favor of you."

He chuckled at her. "You don't need to ask me for favors. Just tell me what you need."

She took a deep breath. "I want you to come to the culture festival at school. Akechi is going to be the guest speaker, so anything he might say could be helpful."

Akechi would be a guest speaker? Akihiko figured he was regaining popularity again, thanks to his supposed *correct* stance on the Phantom Thieves after Okumura's death. But still…

"He knows about me and you and Sis. He knows about Mom. He's likely only going to trip *me* up." Makoto took a step towards him, that earlier fire in her eyes fading and giving way to a degree of fear. "While my friends are all supportive, they don't *know* . I'll feel so much better if you could be there."

It wasn't surprising at this point that Akechi knew about his family, but what he planned to do with that information was beyond him. Nothing *good* , he was sure of that. But Makoto was right. If she

could successfully deflect his attention by throwing some well-aimed questions at him, it could lead to a breakthrough. Even a little one.

Or even better, he could make a *mistake* .

“Well then,” he said, dropping a hand to her shoulder with a smile. “I guess I can teach you all I know about the art of interrogation.”

Chapter 126

Chapter 126

She was honestly surprised Makoto let her walk off without much of a fight.

Minako was relieved. If Makoto had argued with her, she would have felt compelled to return home with her. Going back to the Metaverse was intimidating, but with Mitsuru there, perhaps she could offer a different kind of help. She knew the weird world better than anyone else. If Minako wanted to find her answers, to be helpful in the battle with her daughter, this could be her moment.

The only problem was, she didn't okay the plan with Akihiko first. Her biggest fear was that he was going to get angry and chase after her when he was supposed to be resting. She knew he would ask Makoto about her absence, since she was also supposed to return home with her, and Makoto knew better than to lie to her father.

Hopefully, Akihiko trusted her enough to know she wouldn't run off and do anything stupid. She wasn't going alone. And she sure as hell wasn't about to try and fight, assuming she could do anything at all.

She would make it up to him when she returned home. For now, she had work to do.

Minako wouldn't admit out loud, but the train ride back to Shibuya was nerve-wracking. She vividly remembered the last time she entered the Metaverse, and she was terrified it would happen again. Not only that, but it would be *worse* . Ren's cat had told her that maybe someone didn't want her to know something, but what could someone possibly be hiding from her? It was her *right* to know her past.

And what about Igor? How did that old man forget her? How many people did he really deal with on a day to day basis? And where was Theo? She didn't know enough about her weird powers, or the

forces that gave them to her, but she always assumed Igor and Theo were *special.* Like they would live forever special. Even if she thought that maybe Theo had moved on, or was perhaps linked to her and he died when she fell into her coma, why did she wake back up without him?

Could Theo have been the reason she woke up at all? Was it possible that he sacrificed himself to bring her back to life, and that was also why Igor was mad at her?

It was extremely bizarre, yet it made sense. In a weird way. If that was what truly happened.

Thanks to her thought process, she almost missed her stop. Had it not been for the crowds of people trying to push past her at a busy station, she probably wouldn't have noticed she was in Shibuya. Once she was pushed off the train and onto the platform and the chaos around her calmed, she took a deep breath. It was one of the few things she hated about Tokyo; everyone being in such a hurry and not caring about running her over to get to where they needed to go.

When she was good to go again, Minako started making her walk to where they had entered the Metaverse the last time. It had been a while, and so much had happened since then, but her memory didn't fail her. It was quite a distance to walk, but she eventually caught a glimpse of Mitsuru after she rounded a corner.

She made eye contact with her, then Mitsuru nodded once before taking a seat a good distance away from her. Minako walked up to where she was sitting and dropped herself to the empty space next to her.

Mitsuru was the first to speak, but never looked over at her. "Does Akihiko know you're here?"

It would be rude to lie to her now. "No. But Makoto went home, and I trust her to keep him from leaving."

Her friend didn't seem to agree, but said nothing else about it. "Ken is running a little late, but as soon as he's here, we will go in."

Minako only nodded her head, trying to keep their friendship hidden from curious eyes. It also gave her time to herself. She prepared for any and every outcome. She told herself that if she didn't learn anything, it wasn't the end of the world. She pulled out her phone, worried that Akihiko would try and reach her, but he hadn't. She just didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

"Alright. Let's be off."

Minako snapped her head up. She looked around the area, spotting Yukari and Junpei by the vending machines. Ken had taken a seat in the chair on the other side of Mitsuru. Fuuka and Aigis casually walked up to them, but didn't say anything.

Mitsuru said nothing, but pulled out her phone and did *something* . Minako started to feel sick. Her head was pounding. She was short of breath. And when she opened her eyes again, the world had changed.

They were standing in the same place Makoto had taken them to weeks ago. For the moment, Minako felt better now than when she had arrived the first time. How long that would last, she didn't know, so she took the time that was offered to her to look around the area.

"W-Where are we?"

She forgot that some of her friends had never been to the Metaverse before. Yukari and Junpei looked horrified. Aigis looked on guard, but curious. Mitsuru moved to stand between all of them.

"I'm afraid I don't have many answers, but from what I can gather, this *is* the Dark Hour, but inaccessible unless pulled in by someone who has the means."

Ken looked around like he was an excited child. "It feels much the same. But damn is this really creepy."

"I do not detect ghosts on this level."

"Stop it, Aigis!"

"Yuka-tan!!"

While Yukari slapped Junpei across the face for jumping up behind her, Minako couldn't help but feel *different* being here with her friends. The same group of people she had fought with years ago. She had always said that they would get through their hardships together, but actually *being* with them again was comforting. Even if they were finding humor in something that was far from funny. It was *them* .

"We've come here for a purpose," Mitsuru added, likely saving Junpei's life. "From my understanding, we need to travel down one more flight of stairs to look for shadows."

"How did we even get here?" Ken asked. "Last time we went to Sae's place, we had to say all sorts of words. You didn't even speak."

Mitsuru once again held their attention. "I'm not sure why there is a difference. This is presumably public domain. A palace, like our trip to Sae's, was more personal. Perhaps palaces require a code to get in, but this place does not."

Fuuka smiled. "Kind of like a computer! Public networks are anyone's game and easy to access. Private networks require a password, so maybe they work similarly."

Minako figured that was the case, or at least, it made sense. She just didn't want to think about *hacking* into her daughter's mental thoughts. It was hard enough to do that in the real world, let alone *this* one.

"Still," came Ken's quiet voice. "The Dark Hour was nothing like this. But I guess time has its way of making everything different."

Mitsuru nodded her head. "Which is why I wanted us all to see this world with our own eyes. I would also like to see if we can all summon our personas again."

Junpei smacked a fist into his palm. "Oh, hell yeah!"

Yukari, in turn, rolled her eyes. "We're getting a little too old now, don't you think?"

“Why do you need to know if we can summon our personas?”

Ken’s question remained unanswered for several minutes. Mitsuru shot a look to Minako, but she simply looked away. This was about Sae, she knew it, and Mitsuru was trying not to step on her toes. So, she nodded to her friend, telling her with an action that whatever she had to say, she would accept it.

Mitsuru complied. “Our main goal is to support the younger generation when they access Sae’s palace in the future. However, even if we are to enter alone to investigate without them, we must be prepared for an ambush. I’d rather know our capabilities before entering this time and plan accordingly.”

Minako continued to look around the dark area, trying to spot that blue light that led her to the Velvet Room years before. Aigis came up to stand next to her, and she oddly felt so much safer with her.

“Are you well, Minako?”

She did her best to sound like she wasn’t lost and in a daze and feeling slightly sick from the transition into the Metaverse. “Yeah, I’m okay.”

“You’re looking for something?”

Her eyes fell to a corner wall, close to where they had entered, but saw nothing. “Kind of.” She felt like if the Velvet Room was anywhere, that area would be where she would find it. It was also the same spot she had passed out on her last visit, so she was nervous about approaching it again. Maybe she could swing by on their way out.

Aigis didn’t seem to find her answer acceptable, but the robot turned and faced the rest of the group. “We must keep Minako safe. She does not have the power right now.”

I’ll get it back.

“Maybe you need a seriously frightening and life depending moment to call them back again!”

Yukari slapped Junpei *again* , but his comment got her thinking. Maybe he was right. Maybe she did need some kind of life or death scenario to awaken to her powers again. She had no idea why she would have to be the only one, but she also knew she had a unique power. It probably wasn't something that came and went as she would want it to.

But if that were the case, she likely wouldn't be able to get them back. She knew she was weak. Powerless. Defenseless. So the last thing she was going to do was charge into danger and hope her powers came back in time to save her. It may be that terrifying moment she would have needed, but the cost was too great. Akihiko would throw himself in front of her before she could realize it was too late and she needed to run. One of her other friends would have done the same. *Makoto* would have done the same.

Yet, she just wanted to know *why* . Why was she brought back? Why did Igor not know who she was? Why was Theo gone? Why did she lose her powers in the first place when no one else seemed to lose theirs?

"I understand you want answers, Minako." She looked over to Mitsuru, who wore a sad smile. "But your safety is our first priority. If we learn something along the way, then we will go from there."

It was an acceptable agreement, so as Mitsuru led the group towards the dark stairwell, Minako tried to tell herself again that if she was meant to learn about what happened, she would.

"Okay. I'll say it." Minako looked over her shoulder to find Yukari literally turning as white as a sheet. "Am I the only freaking out here?!"

She felt bad for Yukari, who was gripping Ken's arm so tight it looked like he was in a little bit of pain. The entire thing was terrifying, just as the Dark Hour had been. She had to admit she was intimidated herself. Aside from not knowing what was to come, her pain could come back at the worst possible time. The shadows could sense something about her and attack her.

"There is no need for alarm, Minako." She turned to Aigis, but she

also wanted to search for her hand. “We will keep you safe.”

She felt tears come to her eyes while Yukari grumbled in the background. “Thank you, Aigis.”

Mitsuru also added, “Akihiko would never forgive us if we let anything happen to you.”

It was odd to be comforted by the friends that months ago, she thought she would never see again. But she welcomed it. Even without Akihiko around to protect her, she felt safe with all of them.

“I’ll protect you, Yuka-tan!”

She would never grow tired of Yukari and Junpei’s banter, especially when she needed the humor the most.

“I sense something down below.” Fuuka pulled her hands together in an attempt to concentrate. “We should all be careful.”

Yukari took a deep breath, then stood behind Ken, and Junpei brought up the rear. “I am not going to lie, I am really nervous about this.”

“It’s oddly similar to the Dark Hour,” Mitsuru said, trying to calm Yukari’s nerves. “I know we haven’t been in ages, but we will keep to the exit in case we need to retreat. Our job is only to see if we can manage to summon them again. No more.”

Mitsuru then turned to finish leading them all down the staircase and onto the next floor. Minako stayed behind her. Aigis was at her side. The others were a few steps behind Aigis. It was quiet. It was dark. She started to feel like she was suffocating. She felt her knees give out under her, but Aigis was quick to catch her. Minako leaned up against the wall to calm her heartbeat, but after a few minutes, everything started to fade away.

A second later, everything came back to her. In her cleared vision, she saw a lot of red. They were on a platform, maybe. There were train tracks. There was an opposing platform across the tracks. Minako knew she was in a different world, but at the same time, there were a lot of parallels to reality. It was so much like the Dark

Hour; a twisted version of what was *real* .

“This is so fucked up.”

“I agree,” Junpei added as he stepped up to the tracks. “It feels like the Dark Hour, but I also feel like we are in the train station!”

Soon, there was a light at the end of the tunnel. Aigis grabbed her arm and pulled her back against the wall while Mitsuru urged everyone to do the same. The light turned out to be a train on the opposite track, heading down towards the abyss, and *people* were getting on.

“Interesting.”

“Okay, this is freaking me out.”

Fuuka was the first to push herself off the wall. “There’s something dark down there. I can sense a little bit, but it’s one of the worst feelings I’ve ever had.”

“Maybe what’s down there holds the key to our questions.”

Minako held up a hand to keep Ken from getting too excited. “If Fuuka senses danger, we shouldn’t get involved. Especially right now.”

Mitsuru nodded beside her. “I agree. For now, we remain on this floor and we can scope the area out. We stay together. And we should also prepare to escape if we find ourselves in over our heads.”

Junpei gave her a thumbs up, then jumped down onto the tracks. Minako wanted to call out to him, since he was *always* the one to charge into danger without blinking. They also didn’t know if there would be a train coming into their platform and if it would kill them or fight them or do nothing at all. The corridors ahead of them looked narrow, and dark, so she didn’t want to walk down them and have no escape if a train did enter the station.

However, Mitsuru followed after Junpei. “Amamiya told me that while the station feels lifelike, it’s not real. He was unaware of the danger,

but their team has never encountered physical harm from anything that was not a shadow."

It didn't really help her state of mind, but the others seemed to be okay with the reasoning. Minako took a deep breath, then reached for Aigis's hand. Together, they both approached the edge of the platform and carefully jumped down to the tracks.

So far, so good.

They all walked through the tunnels carefully. They were all very close to each other, never letting one person wander too far away from their group. Yukari purposely chose to walk behind Junpei so he didn't scare her again, but Minako and Aigis were the last in line. Almost like she was never their leader. Never someone who stood at the front. Never someone who defended instead of being protected.

She suddenly missed Akihiko. While holding Aigis's hand was calming her, it wasn't enough. Akihiko could read her mind. He could sense her anxiety. He would do nothing more than what Aigis and her friends were doing now, but he would soothe her in a way they never could. Sadly, she had to accept that he wasn't going to be there, and she had to tough it out in his absence.

"There's something ahead of us!"

Fuuka stepped back while Aigis replaced her position on the front line. Mitsuru warned them all with a wave that there was danger, and they all took the announcement seriously. Mitsuru and Junpei stood at the front with Ken and Aigis behind them. Yukari stood in front of her, with Fuuka at her side. There was silence, minus the pounding of her heart in her ears.

Then, there came a gurgling noise from the darkness.

"Brace yourselves."

It was then that Minako realized that no one was truly prepared to fight with a weapon like they had done in the past. Akihiko was really the only one who could fight with his bare hands. Aigis *was* a

weapon. Other than that, they were screwed.

How in gods' name did Makoto and her friends walk to a station and never get caught with weapons?

"Junpei. Ken. I want you two to try first."

Both men walked to the front of their group with Mitsuru right behind them in case something went wrong. It was odd to see them standing with *nothing* to defend themselves, but they both looked ready to fight. They didn't have an Evoker either. Minako knew Akihiko and Mitsuru had called their personas before without one, but she didn't think the others had…

She figured she was going to find out.

She watched them both carefully while keeping her eyes ahead of them to where the noise had come from. A minute later, there was another sound, followed by footsteps, then an actual figure.

It was all black. Huge. Ugly.

A shadow.

Neither Ken nor Junpei moved from their place, and Minako worried that if they didn't move, the shadow would attack them. Junpei was the first one to take a step back, but Ken remained where he was, head down, hands clenched at his side. The shadow beast roared, which sent a shockwave of fear down her spine, but Ken *didn't move.*

"Ken!"

But he didn't budge. Minako almost pushed Yukari aside to rush in and save him like she would have done years ago. He was still the baby, no matter how many years had passed. It was her job to protect them all, with her powers or not. And right now, a shadow was lifting his hand to deliver a blow to the youngest member of her team.

Then, Ken lifted his head. "Kala-Nemi."

Out of nowhere, another figure emerged and stood directly behind Ken. The giant persona looked exactly like Minako remembered, and it had been several years. The shadow moved its head to look up (even if it had no eyes), but if it thought about running away to escape, it never got its chance.

A bright light encased the shadow, followed by a shrieking noise, then nothing at all. The shadow was obliterated by a rare and successful Hamaon. It was quite impressive, and she wasn't the only one who thought that.

"Very well done, Ken."

"Wow…"

"Enemy eliminated. Great job, Ken-kun."

"My turn! My turn!"

Ken soon leaned over and placed his hands on his knees, winded and trying to catch his breath. "Wow. Okay. I am…wow, worn out."

Mitsuru stood next to him. "This was all we needed to see. Rest now, and let's see if the others can do the same."

Minako wondered if maybe she learned *how* Ken had summoned his persona, she could do it, too. When he was close enough to her, she took a hesitant step closer to keep their conversation quiet. The rest of her friends formed a line, Junpei obviously first, to see who could summon theirs next.

"How did you do that?"

Ken took a few breaths, then turned to her slowly. "I did what Sanada did when I watched him summon his. He seemed really focused, so I took that time to dig down and remember that feeling that brought me Kala-Nemi in the first place."

That was some serious concentration. "How did you know it was enough?"

"Honestly," he said between breaths. "I just *felt* something. And

when I opened my eyes again, everything was clear, and I felt like a new person."

If she had that level of focus, could she summon one of hers again? Was it different for her since she had several personas? Would she have to try that much harder to reach just *one* of them?

"I know you're worried, Minako." She looked back over at Ken, who appeared to be breathing normally again. "You've done enough in the past. So maybe for once, you should let *us* protect *you* ."

Maybe that was what she *didn't* want to do. Sae was her daughter. They were her friends. She felt obligated to share some level of responsibility. And how was she supposed to do that if she couldn't do *anything?*

"I just want to get some answers." Her hands clenched at her side as her vision blurred. "If I could find them, I could help. I could help my own children. Akihiko wouldn't have to suffer in silence. Yet here I am, powerless to do *anything* to help."

Ken looked back to where Junpei had tried (and failed, much to Yukari's delight) to summon his persona. He wore a smile, but she couldn't see his eyes to know the emotion behind it. "Sometimes, doing nothing is the hardest thing to do, but it's necessary. And you're the strongest out of all of us. No one else in our group could go through what you did, what you still do, and keep your head up like this."

Minako felt a few tears escape her eyes, but she didn't say anything more. It was a compliment and a knife at the same time. But she knew she couldn't keep bothering her friends with her troubles, especially since they wouldn't have the answer for her. No one likely did. Except the one man she couldn't seem to get a hold of anymore, who had forgotten about her, who probably *did* want her to find her answers on her own.

"But I don't think you need to find answers, Minako." Ken turned his attention back to her. "You've made the best of your life without them. Why all of the sudden is it so important to you now?"

The question made her pause. While deep down, knowing what had happened during her coma would make her feel better, it wouldn't change anything. It wouldn't destroy her relationship with Akihiko or her children. It wouldn't ruin the friendships she had. It was a selfish request really, but one that only started nagging on her recently since she started talking to Ren.

Perhaps she should return with him and see what happened.

"You've grown up, Ken." For laughs, and to make herself feel better, she pinched his cheek, earning a groan from him. "Thank you."

After he gave her a disapproving look, he crossed his arms. "Maybe Junpei was right though. Maybe in order for you to feel that connection with them again, you have to be faced with that life or death scenario, or some kind of shock like when you first summoned them. Not that I want that to happen, but your powers were very different than ours…"

Minako just really, *really* hoped it didn't come to that.

Chapter 127

Chapter 127

She kept thinking she had so much time to prepare for the festival. Then, she blinked, and the day had come.

Makoto felt extremely underprepared. The only thing she was sure of was that Goro Akechi was going to be attending. He had replied to her the day before, the last *possible* moment, and told her would *love* to come. Thanks to his ridiculously thought out delay, she had little time to think about how she would interview him.

She was thankful her father had taken some time to prep her for whatever Akechi would throw at her. In fact, she took notes and had a pretty decent outline for how she would approach him.

At least, she thought it was decent…

"It seems you were correct on your stance about the Phantom Thieves. How did you manage the negative press?"

"Why don't you ask your sister, or your father, or your Phantom Thief friends?"

"Dad! That wasn't what you were supposed to say."

"You're reading a script, Makoto. You have to be able to adjust to his answers on the spot. While it's okay to have a plan when you go in, you need to prepare for the unexpected and move from there."

It was going to be harder than he made it sound. She loved plans, things written on paper, facts to back up her reason. She couldn't make anything nearly as promising as she wanted to for her talk with Akechi, and it terrified her.

"Don't show your nervousness or he will walk all over you."

The only thing that gave her comfort had been that her dad would be

there. He didn't tell her where he would be, or when he would show up, but he would *be* there. Just like the time she walked around Kabukicho for information and he was standing behind her, letting her take the reins of the case.

But what if Akechi really knew she was a Phantom Thief? What if he said that to the student body? Would they believe him? Would he come prepared with evidence? *Did* he have evidence? She would like to think that since the police hadn't come to arrest her, he didn't have a good case yet. Or if he did, he was keeping it quiet to embarrass her at the right time.

She should have found a different guest speaker. But a part of her was ready to challenge Akechi. She couldn't let him win. If she would have denied the students their chance to meet Akechi because she was intimidated of him, he would win.

At least she still had one day to plan her strategy for the interview. She could get some advice from her friends, some last-minute tips from her dad, and one full night of sleep.

Now, it was up to the student body to make the best out of the two-day festival.

Makoto left a little earlier than she would normally leave for school to try and get everything squared away. Surprisingly, her council had been helpful in preparing for the festival, being more motivated to make everything perfect since Akechi would be coming around. It took a lot of responsibility off of her shoulders, but she figured it was still her duty to make sure they were all good to go.

When she arrived at school, there was hardly anyone there. One of her council members waved at her, then the girl returned to talking to a teacher about some finishing details. Makoto knew her friends wouldn't be arriving until a little bit later, and Ren would be one of the last ones since he was waiting for Futaba, who liked to sleep in.

Haru was the first of her friends to arrive at the school. She knocked on the door to the student council room, then popped her head inside. "Good morning, Mako-chan."

Makoto offered her a smile as she closed her notebook. “Good morning.”

“Are you excited for the festival?”

Was she? Not really. It was her last year, and she finally had some friends to enjoy it with, but it also brought a wave of stress she could have done without. Especially since it came at a terrible time, when she was worried about her sister and how her friends would accept the new task.

But she didn’t want to ruin Haru’s good mood. “It’s our last year, so we should enjoy it to its fullest.”

Her answer didn’t seem to have the desired effect on her friend, but Haru’s smile never faded. “It’s kind of scary, being seniors. I haven’t even applied to colleges yet.”

The admission calmed Makoto down immensely. “I haven’t either. I keep thinking I have so much time in the world, but I don’t. This year has been crazy.”

Haru’s smile became more genuine. “It sure has, but at least I got to meet you and all of our other friends! It’s been fun, too!”

“Do you know what you want to do when you go to college?” She hoped the question wasn’t too personal, or too forward. She doubted Haru would mind, but she didn’t want to force her into answering if she was uncomfortable.

“I’m not sure, if I’m being honest. I might not have the time to pursue a college degree right now. Things are chaotic with my father’s estate and business, and I feel like I need to finalize plans with that first.”

Right. It was rude of her to forget that Haru had been dealing with the effects from losing her father. “I-I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bring up such troubling times for you.”

“Oh, stop it, Mako-chan,” Haru said with a laugh. “I don’t mind. I actually feel bad for hiding all of this. I just don’t want to bother my friends with my own personal problems.”

God did she know exactly how she felt. “You can always talk to me, Haru. If it helps you.”

Haru’s smile widened. “You’re such a good friend, Mako-chan. So let me ask you, what do you want to do when you go to college?”

Despite her best wishes, Makoto felt her face burn slightly. “I, um…I want to be a police officer, like my dad. And then, I want to climb through the ranks to be a commissioner, to protect as many people as I can.”

The warmth in Haru’s eyes made her flush even more. “That’s a wonderful goal. I think that fits you very well.”

“Well,” she said quietly. “We will see. I’ve got a long way to go, and I think this interview with Akechi will show how much I still need to improve.”

“Don’t worry, Mako-chan!” Haru moved around the table to grab one of her hands. “If he makes you uncomfortable at all, just give me a look, and I’ll punch him in the face.”

Makoto was taken back by her seriousness, then broke out into a smile. “Thank you, Haru.”

For the next thirty minutes or so, Haru openly talked about her troubles, her family business, the people who were more interested in the family fortune than in the family itself. Makoto listened with a heavy heart, not having a clue as to what Haru was truly feeling, and suddenly feeling grateful for the family life she had.

At least she knew her family loved her. Haru didn’t seem to be as lucky. And Sis may have been hurting others, but she would never sell her off to a creepy man just for her own gain.

Eventually, the topic turned to the festival. Haru was just as excited as she was about spending her last one with friends. Makoto didn’t admit to her that while she had technically planned two of the three culture festivals at Shujin, she had never participated in one. She dove headfirst into the planning, so much so that she really didn’t need to be there, except to keep the students in line. She honestly

didn't know what to expect. She had only seen the culture festival through piles of requests and paperwork.

"I heard Ann's class is doing a Takoyaki maid café! I love Takoyaki!"

The fact Haru was a fan of something so *general* caught her attention. "I can't say I'm a fan myself."

"Oh?" Her friend gave her another brilliant smile. "What if Ren made it special, just for you?"

Not the twist she was anticipating in the conversation. "H-Huh?"

Haru chuckled into her hand. "Oh, Mako-chan. You're so cute. Your face is so red right now!"

To hide it, she buried her face behind her hands. "H-How did you know?!"

"I think I might be offended," Haru said with another laugh. "But if I may say so, I think you two are adorable."

Makoto didn't know how to approach the issue of being Ren's *girlfriend* since no one really knew, but in hindsight, it was pretty obvious. He would wait for her after school and walk her home. He would always go out of his way to speak to her at least once a day. He favored her in battles.

"I hope you don't think less of me, or of him…"

Haru smacked her forearm with her hand. "Nonsense! I think it's a perfect match! Don't ever be offended by it!"

Just when Makoto lowered her hands, Haru's eyes turned more devious. Just like her mom's would before she embarrassed her. "Have you kissed him yet?"

Her hands flew back to her face. "W-What?!"

All Haru did was laugh. But thankfully, her questions ended there. A minute or two later, Ann and Ryuji showed up (much to Haru's delight, as she poked fun at them, too. Ryuji vehemently denied

anything). Ann sat beside her and joined in on the energy of sharing the experience at the culture festival as friends. Ryuji plopped down in a chair and pulled out his phone, not at all interested in voicing his thoughts.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been so excited about our school’s culture festival!” Ann said with her own bright smile. “I hope there’s some good food!”

And once everyone had arrived, Ann was the one to lead the charge of browsing the stalls and the halls for a snack. Haru seemed to be eager to head to Ann and Ren’s homeroom to try their Takoyaki (she also added a wink to Makoto), but Ann told her it would be best to save it for last.

The walk around the school was actually kind of nice. Everyone was excited, from her friends, to the students, to the guests that had dropped by. It introduced a level of energy to the school that had been missing for weeks. Even so, it was hard to be interested in the festival when Ren was standing *so close* to her. At one point, she thought he tried to reach for her hand.

She didn’t know if she should try herself, or if she should quietly and gently remind him that they were in public and no one knew. Even if it wouldn’t have been uncommon, since he liked to hold her hand when they were together after school anyway. Plus, Haru seemed to know they were dating. Futaba probably did. Ann may have known, too.

What was the point of keeping it a secret now? Haru didn’t mind. And if the others knew, they didn’t voice any concerns that she was aware of. Maybe she could talk to him about the issue, once they successfully dealt with Akechi.

“I don’t even think I know your favorite food, Makoto.” Ren was literally whispering in her ear, something that made her warm a few degrees too many. Was she supposed to answer back the same way? Given their height difference, *someone* would notice her sharing a secret with Ren. Not that it really was a secret, but still. Everyone would think that.

But no one seemed to be paying them any attention, since they were standing in the back of the group. “I don’t really have a favorite food, but I like to cook a variety of meals.”

Ren turned to her with a typical Ren-like charming grin. “Offering to cook me dinner one night?”

She really needed to learn how to hide her blush when he acted like this. “I-I mean…if…if you want me to.”

“We should make it a date sometime.”

There was no way the school didn’t notice her blush. “Perhaps once everything is settled, I can make you whatever you want.”

Ren’s smile made his eyes glimmer. “I’d really like that.”

She was forced to look away before the shine in his eyes made her do something stupid in public. “W-Well…w-what are you excited about today?”

She heard him breathe out a laugh. “Spending more time with you.”

He was a little *too* good at this. “O-Oh…”

Ren said nothing more to her, so she worried for a moment that she had hurt his feelings by not having something equally romantic to say back to him. But when she found the courage to look over at him, that smile was still on his face. He was still walking close enough to her that every now and then, his hand brushed up against hers. He looked happy. She felt comfortable.

Then, she got a shock she wasn’t ready for. “Sanada!”

Makoto quickly looked around the hallway for her dad. Ryuji had spotted him as he came around a corner, and he had come around the corner with *her mother* . She stood still, frozen in her place, wondering what in the world her dad was doing at the school, with her mom, on the *first* day. Did she not make it clear to him that Akechi would be interviewed the second day?

She also noticed that Ren took a step away from her, and her

mother caught it. Her smile widened as her eyes remained on the two of them, even if she spoke to the group as a whole. “Well. It’s nice to meet you all.”

Assuming they were both here to gather intelligence, or whatever, her parents couldn’t come right out and act like they knew them all. Ryuji would have made sense, since he personally knew her dad. Maybe criminal eyes (wherever they were) would expect her to know them, too. They *were* her parents, and not too many people *didn’t* know at this point.

“I hope you’re staying out of trouble, Sakamoto.”

She could practically feel Ryuji’s grin. “Ah, c’mon man! You know me!”

Her dad rolled his eyes with a huff and her mom laughed behind her hand. “It seems like you’ve got some wonderful friends, Makoto.”

What was happening? Was this a plot created by her dad to try and trip her up? She was under the impression it was just going to be *him* , not both of them, *tomorrow* . Why wouldn’t he have told her that earlier before she left?

Before she could question either of them, her mom bowed to the group, turned back to her dad, and drug him farther down the hall. Yusuke, Ann, and Ryuji acted like nothing had happened, but Ryuji mumbled something about forgetting to tell her dad where his classroom was so they could hang out. Futaba turned to her with a smile, not one of her all-knowing ones, and patted her on the arm.

“Your parents are really cool, Makoto.”

“O-Oh, um…t-thank you...?”

Futaba chuckled and followed after the others.

Haru smiled at her as well. “They seem like such wonderful people.”

She blushed, unable to respond to a second wave of praise.

“I think he’s going to successfully kill me one day.”

Ren's comment got her to laugh. "I don't think you have anything to worry about."

She felt him reach for her hand and give it a light tug. "Every time I get lost in my own mind about us, he pops up. Like he *knows* I'm thinking about you."

She squeezed his hand. "He's a good cop then."

"Just like I'm sure you will be, yeah?"

It was a miracle she hadn't burned alive yet. Or that she hadn't set one of her friends on fire.

For the most part, the day was smooth sailing. No more bizarre twists. No more pop-ups from people she didn't expect to pop-up. Ken dropped a quick hello and goodbye to the group before he left to tend to his class's display, which was aimed specifically on Sapporo.

Makoto tried to soak it all in. There was so much information to gain about a range of cultures and people that she may find interesting. At one point, she wandered off the path of the group to look at one of the poster boards that caught her attention. The pictures were beautiful from somewhere out in the middle of the country, and it made her think. There was so much of the world, her own country she didn't know about. There was so much about people, about her friends, about her family she didn't know about.

But she was changing all of that. She had left Tokyo twice that year with friends. She learned how to read her friends when they were battling in the Metaverse. She learned so much from shadowing her dad and having him teach her about police work in general.

Sis missed out on all of this. She missed out on enjoying something as simple as a culture festival because she wanted to be angry. Makoto briefly wondered if Sae regretted any of it, or if she would have done it all over again if she had the choice. But regardless of what Sae thought of her past, Makoto was going to do everything she could to give her a better future.

“You must really be interested in Shirakawago. I recommend visiting. It’s a beautiful place.”

Makoto tensed in her spot, not knowing how long she had been staring at the pictures. She felt her face burn from being caught, but the voice didn’t belong to Ren, or one of her friends. It could have been one of the students, but the feeling she was having wasn’t because a *stranger* was speaking to her.

It was Akechi. And she was alone with him. Kind of. Her friends must have turned a corner without her. Her parents were nowhere to be seen. It was almost like when Akechi came into the room, everyone else vanished.

Figuratively *and* literally, if he really was the black mask guy.

But she was in a tight spot. She was student council president. He was a guest. She couldn’t treat him like the enemy without raising hell from the student body that had wanted him there. “Can I help you?”

He simply chuckled at her. “You’ve done a fantastic job with this festival. I’m very impressed.”

It had been a day full of compliments and blushes, but Akechi’s felt more like a weak stab at her pride. “All I really had to do was make sure you were in attendance and the students would have been happy.”

She felt a hand on her shoulder. When he leaned into her, she took an equal step away. “You work a little too hard for others, you know? It’s not always a bad thing to strive for your own personal goals.”

Her dad’s words from that morning echoed loudly in her ears. Whether she knew Akechi’s motives for speaking to her or not, she couldn’t let a comment like that slide without pouncing on it.

“And you speak from experience, I take it.”

He wore a flashy grin. “I might.”

She didn’t know how to push him into being more open with her.

She knew very little about him. And if she was too direct, he would know. “You’re very well-traveled if you’ve been to a place like this.” She turned back to the board, then added, “I’m quite jealous.”

He chuckled and again, took a step closer to her. He was close enough to her that she felt his breath on her neck. It was a little creepy. “If I didn’t know any better, I would think you are trying to flirt with me, Makoto.”

And there was the Akechi she had been expecting. She stepped away from him with a glare. “No I’m not.”

But he smiled at her in a way that shot a cold chill down her spine. One of his hands reached out to grab her arm, then he forcibly pulled her into him. While her first instinct was to push him away, she had to remember where she was. It upset her that not one single student was screaming for Akechi to talk to them or sign an autograph or take a picture with them when she figured he would be surrounded by fans all day.

“I’m sure Amamiya won’t mind if I steal you away for a day.”

His tone scared the hell out of her. Just when she managed to pull herself out of his grip, someone *finally* came up behind her. And past her. And pushed Akechi back into a wall and stood face to face with him. And grabbed at his collar and said something to him as he threw Akechi back into the wall.

It was something her dad would have done in a heartbeat.

But it wasn’t her dad.

Ren.

Makoto snapped out of the shock and took the few steps forward to pull on Ren’s jacket sleeve. Ren turned to her, and for the first time in her life, she saw him angry. His eyes were narrowed and sharp and almost *intimidating.* It only lasted a second, but it was a look she would never forget.

Ren released Akechi, then muttered a half-hearted apology. He kept his head lowered, likely feeling some level of guilt for his outburst,

but Akechi just shrugged his shoulders and waved his hand with that *damn* smile.

“I do apologize for keeping her away from you, Amamiya. I’ll see you both tomorrow.”

There was another flash of anger in Ren’s eyes, but he didn’t say or do anything else as Akechi turned and walked away. She watched him take a deep breath, then he dropped his shoulders with a sigh.

“I’m sorry.”

It surprised her. Ren had never been so emotional or physical with anyone since she had known him. Granted she had been physical with Akechi before, it was different to see that kind of response from Ren.

At least he apologized for it. “O-Oh…N-No, it’s okay…”

Ren’s hands lifted to his head, like he was having a headache. “I just…I panicked. I thought he was hurting you, or trying to force you to go somewhere.”

Makoto reached out to pull one of his arms down. “It’s okay, Ren. Please.”

“I scared you.”

“N-No…” He had, but she knew he wasn’t turning his anger to her. “I’ve just never seen you so upset.”

When Ren’s arms dropped to his side, she made a move to grab both of his hands. His head remained down, but after a few calming breaths, he looked back up at her. “I want to protect you, but I never want to scare you.”

She gave him a small smile. “Thank you, then.” His eyes met her own. “I’m glad to know that I can depend on you.”

He stared back at her with a blank look. A few seconds later, his lips curled up into a smile. “I know you can take care of yourself, but I want you to know that I will be there for you when you need me. I’ll

try not to act like this again."

She figured she could offer him a hug to calm him down. He returned the embrace almost a little too powerfully before she pulled away from him. "We should probably meet back up with our friends. I heard you might have some special Takoyaki for me."

His smile split his face in half and his laugh warmed her heart. "I will make sure you get only the best, my Queen."

One of his hands held one of hers, and she felt comfortable standing next to him as they walked to Ren's homeroom. Makoto tried to release his hand when their friends came into view, but Ren wouldn't let her.

"I think they know, so if they ask, we can tell them. If they don't, then we don't have to. If that's okay?"

The shy smile on his face made her nod her head in a way to hide the flush coming to her face. Oddly enough, when she took her seat at the table their friends were at, Ren slid into the seat next to her. Shortly after, his hand found hers again under the table.

Ann and Haru, who sat across from them, gave her a knowing smile. Futaba, who sat next to her, laughed under breath. Yusuke was the one who pulled the attention off of herself.

"I see your class has a variety of Takoyaki to try out."

The others scanned over the two or three paper menus on the table, but Ren leaned into her. "I'll surprise you with the best. Don't worry."

She couldn't tell him she wasn't the biggest fan of the snack, but anything he did *for her* , she would go along with. Anything that gave her the chance to see his smile, she would do it.

Chapter 128

Chapter 128

While he was thrilled that Minako was having a blast at her first ever culture festival, she could have been a little less obvious.

The only reason Akihiko asked her if she wanted to go was because she wouldn't let him out of the house otherwise. When she found out he was going to Makoto's school for a festival, her eyes grew wide and there was a sparkle in them that he knew would get him into trouble.

Sure enough, after being caught by Makoto's friends in the hallway at the school, Minako took her excitement to the next level. "You have to admit this is a lot of fun!"

They had been denied their culture festival back when he was a senior in high school, the same year he met Minako, but he really didn't think it was that tragic of a loss. He got to travel while he was on his two-year stint out of the country. He got to see the world and experience different cultures first-hand.

While he would never admit it to Minako, especially now, he was *bored* walking around the school. His main reason for even going was to keep tabs on Akechi and see if he could make the teen nervous somehow.

His second reason: to prove to those watchful eyes, or to Shido himself, that he was not afraid. He didn't care if they saw him with Minako at his daughter's school function. He didn't care if anyone else saw them together. It was hopefully a slap to Shido's face, who figured he would have stayed down, but refused.

But no matter how hard he tried to deny it, Akihiko loved the energy Minako had, the smile she wore, the shine to her face. "It's fun watching you for sure."

The time at the school wasn't anything he found impressive. He ran

into Ken, and Minako demanded they stop by and she vowed to learn everything she could from his students. He never once ran into Akechi. He did, however, manage to hear a few remarks about the Phantom Thieves, about Akechi, about the principal, and he did his best to eavesdrop.

There was a rumor that the principal had been murdered because he refused to bring criminal charges to Kamoshida. Some teens went as far as to say the principal was dealing with the mafia and he was killed because he was no longer needed. A few others said his death was simply natural, since he had been a rather large man.

The student body was eager to hear Akechi's statements about the Phantom Thieves, knowing now that he had been right all along. They seemed to think Akechi would hold all of the answers, so if Makoto played her cards right the following day, he could walk himself right into a trap.

There were some students who claimed the Phantom Thieves were just, and one young boy had gone as far as to openly admit it to a group of people passing by. So, while Minako was chatting up with students nearby about their exhibit, Akihiko took his time to reach out to the boy.

"You seem awfully sure of yourself, kid."

The teenager didn't expect to be approached, by an adult no less, but then his eyes darkened and he glared at him. "I wouldn't expect an adult to understand! They saved me from Kamoshida's abuse. They're good people!"

Hearing Kamoshida's name again struck a nerve. It also meant that this kid could be genuine in his statement and possibly even know who the Phantom Thieves were. Akihiko held up his hands to calm the angry teen down.

"I never said they were bad people." The young man reeled his anger back a bit and Akihiko took a step closer to him to keep the conversation quiet. "I actually looked into Kamoshida before the Phantom Thieves did their thing. I support them, too. I didn't think that after what happened to Okumura that anyone would still think

they were good."

"Y-You…You s-support them?"

There was a degree of surprise on his face. Akihiko quickly reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a piece of paper from his notebook. Not that he doubted his own brain, but with the hell that had been the last few weeks, he didn't want even the slightest detail to be forgotten. He jotted his work number down, then handed it to the still confused teen.

"I work for the police. And I know who these kids are." The boy's eyes widened in horror, either from knowing he was a cop or the fact he *knew* who the Phantom Thieves were. "Makoto is actually my daughter." That was still so strange to admit out loud. "So any information you have about anything, don't hesitate to tell me."

He almost regretted telling the boy that Makoto, Shujin's student council president, was his daughter, but everyone who didn't need to know knew at this point. He didn't figure there was any harm in hiding it anymore. The young man looked down at the piece of paper in his hand, then his eyes lifted back up.

"You're Sakamoto's friend…"

Akihiko didn't know if that was upsetting news or not, so he left it up to the teen to decide whether or not there would be future contact. He walked off, hoping he could get a lead out of the kid in a week or two, and found Minako engaging in a conversation with a few students about the food they had made.

It was simple. Mochi. But she had a way of making everything interesting and new and fun. And the students she had been talking to looked excited to share their knowledge and history with her.

"You're going to eat them out of house and home, Minako," he told her with a growing smile. She, in turn, stuck her tongue out at him and resumed her conversation. He approached the group, but he didn't take the seat next to Minako, worried that he wouldn't be able to get back up with his healing injury. A few minutes later, Minako jumped up and turned to him with a small plate in her hands, and

smiled behind it like she was a child showing off her cooking.

“The kids say that mochi brings good luck, and can sometimes bring happy marriages!”

He gave her a look as she lifted the plate higher into his face. “Are you saying our marriage is in trouble?”

“If you don’t eat at least one, maybe.”

He wasn’t the biggest fan of mochi, but she was having a blast, and he refused to kill her spirit over a *sweet* . Her face lit up brightly when he finally popped one of them into his mouth, then looped an arm through his and pulled him on to the next adventure.

“I was really looking forward to spending our culture festival together, but I guess this makes up for it.” Minako spoke like she was young again. She even *looked* like she was a splitting image of her high school self. It was hard to look away, even if they were out of place and one of the oldest people walking around. “I’m really happy you let me come with you. I know you’re not having the best of times right now.”

He doubted she saw it, but he smiled down at her on their way back to the lobby. “I actually am having a lot of fun watching you have a lot of fun.”

She didn’t say anything to that, but he could see the corners of her lips turn upwards into a smile. They would return the next day for what she didn’t know would be Makoto’s true test to interrogate Akechi. Even if he was only going to be there for moral support, he trusted Makoto’s instincts and knew he could learn *something* from Akechi.

Akihiko wanted to wait for Makoto so they could walk her home, but Minako wouldn’t have it. “She’s going to be here late, I’m guessing. So let’s not wait for her.”

He was suddenly very aware of the tone in her voice, the smile on her face, the glint in her eyes. He had had his eyes on her all day, but now, he was forced to look away. “S-Stop that.”

She, of course, laughed and pulled on both of his arms. “C’mon. We can pick up some dinner on the way back home.”

Once they were both home, fed properly, and happily laying around on the couch, Akihiko’s mind began to pull at him for the first time all day. There was one rumor in particular that had made him physically stop in the hallways of the school.

“I bet the Phantom Thieves killed the principal. He was probably going to tell the police who they were and they silenced him!”

What was the principal’s role? Did he really know Shido? And had he tried to gather the original intel by demanding Makoto go out to find it? And if the principal was another lacky and was about to squeal, his death in front of the station suddenly made more sense. He was an officer at Shujin long before Makoto entered the school, and he doubted that Shido thought *that* far ahead just to take over the city. Then again, the first mental shutdown happened before Makoto was in high school, too. Not only that, the principal may have been someone who benefitted from a mental shutdown and Shido gave him a school to operate.

A school where a man could beat his students and sexually assault them with full protection from the law and no retribution.

A school where students were young and naïve and fell into traps masterminded by Kaneshiro to get more money and continue his human trafficking.

So of course, a phantom attack originating from Shujin with no leads or information would greatly upset the top of the food chain…

It was kind of terrifying, knowing that if Amamiya hadn’t arrived in the city and walked into that palace by accident, things at the school could be far different now.

It was also possible that Shido *knew* Amamiya and now the gods were playing their game of good versus evil to see who would win. He couldn’t ignore the sickening feeling in his gut when Amamiya had told him of his assault. He had no proof it was Shido, and Amamiya hadn’t been able to identify him, but Akihiko could see no

other man saying those words and disappearing like he hadn't even been there while an innocent person paid the price.

The gods were evil bastards, so maybe that was exactly what was happening. It wouldn't be the first time it was a group of kids up against something unimaginable. It was just a little too far-fetched in his mind.

"I'm home."

Minako remained against his side, and when he looked over at her, she had fallen asleep. It was funny, given how often she liked to make fun of him for passing out every now and then. Makoto came into the living room, noticed her mother asleep, then took a seat on the couch beside him.

Had it not been for her scowl, he would have thought everything was fine. "Why did you show up with Mom today?"

Akihiko was briefly taken back by her sourness, but then he shrugged his shoulders. "I told you to expect the unexpected."

"You weren't supposed to show up until tomorrow!"

"Yeah, I know," he replied back much quieter. "But your mom found out about the festival and she wouldn't let me go off without her. So if you want to be angry with someone, be mad at her."

Her glare didn't fade. Instead of a retort, she crossed her arms and huffed out a sigh. "You didn't have to let her embarrass me like that."

He laughed under his breath. "She could have been so much worse."

In her silence, he heard her phone go off. Before Makoto could pull it out of her bag, he swore it went off at least ten more times. And when Makoto completely ignored the messages and turned her phone on silent, he couldn't help but grow extremely curious.

"Amamiya bothering you?"

There was a look of surprise in her eyes, like she didn't expect him

to catch her actions. “W-What?”

He asked her again. “Is Amamiya bothering you?”

The hesitation was all he needed to know that she was hiding something. If Amamiya was hounding her (he saw how often her phone lit up in her hand), he wanted to know if there was a reason. Makoto had told them that he was charged with walking her home, but since he moved back in with Sojiro, maybe he was worried about her. It was a little *too* much, but he tried not to judge.

But Makoto wouldn’t ignore Amamiya either. “I can go set him straight if I need to.”

She fell right into his trap. “Ren isn’t bothering me.”

He figured as much, and with one simple look, Makoto sighed heavily and fell back into the couch. “You remember my friend from Kabukicho with that creepy boyfriend?”

His heart sank into his stomach. He hadn’t been looking into the man like he told Makoto he would. What if her friend was growing scared or getting deeper into trouble? He imagined that this guy would be pretty easy to look up with his credentials and possibly Fuuka’s help, but he hadn’t even *thought* about it.

“Well, he has my number, and he won’t leave me alone.”

In a flash, he felt himself slip into cop mode. “How long has this been going on?”

Makoto refused to make eye contact with him. “S-Since the date.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I thought it wasn’t a big deal at first.” She threw herself forward and rested her face against her palms. “I figured he was just a talker, but then he wouldn’t stop, and his messages are getting a little creepy.”

It took a hell of an amount of restraint not to reach over and grab Makoto’s phone. “So why didn’t you tell me? I could have done

something about it."

She looked defeated and upset, but she left him confused. If this guy was bothering her, why wouldn't she tell someone? Even if it was just annoying and harmless, which it didn't seem to be. Akihiko already had enough to worry about with Shido and one of his goons targeting her, and he knew enough about the club hosts and frequent customers in Kabukicho to know the danger she was getting into.

"I…" Makoto took a breath, refusing to meet his eyes, and held her hands together tightly on her lap. "I…I don't know. I thought they would stop. Then I thought I could use it against him. And by the time I had a plan, I figured you would be upset with me for not saying anything sooner."

Akihiko ran his hands over his face, trying to think. If Makoto wanted to trap this guy, he would need to know the extent of the messages. And he didn't know if he really wanted to know at this point.

"How did you plan on using it against him?"

Her face turned into a scowl. "I thought if my friend Eiko could see them, then she would be upset and she would leave him. But I showed them to her once, and she told me he was just being nice."

Either the messages weren't as bad as he imagined them to be, or Makoto's friend was hooked harder than he thought. He didn't know this girl, so it was possible that she was someone who fell prey to sweet words and flashy promises. Last he heard, Tsukasa (that was his name, right?) knew how to pick the right girl to sway with minimal effort. And if he was stupid enough to try and challenge Makoto, he would deeply regret it.

He shook his head to clear his thoughts. It was getting late. Makoto had to focus on her chat with Akechi tomorrow. He could spend his night looking more into Tsukasa like he should have already done in the past.

"Keep ignoring him, but save them for future evidence." Akihiko carefully nudged Minako to try and wake her up to move to the bed.

“I’ll look into him tonight. For now, you should get some sleep and focus on tomorrow.”

Makoto didn’t care for his answer, but she never argued with him. She had a lot to think about and she needed her mind clear and focused to deal with Akechi. If she really thought that she could interview a smart kid like Akechi with a *planned* script, Makoto would never make it in the real world.

He felt a pang of regret, since he was her father and it was his job to prepare her for her future. Instead, he chose to hold on to the past, wish the days would go by slower, and never thought this day would come.

At least he would be there. Makoto was pretty good about acting in the moment, and he was eager to see how she did under the pressure. Plus, if she did well, Akechi might make one tiny mistake that he could pick up on. Akihiko wanted to go to support Makoto, but at the same time, he would be watching Akechi carefully. One twitch. One pause. One flash of anger was all he would need to see to *know* .

But that was tomorrow. He needed to look into this Tsukasa character more now than he had thought before. While it seemed the creep’s harassment had only been through texts at the moment, Akihiko knew men like that, and it wouldn’t take much longer for that affection to manifest into criminal actions.

He just had to deal with Minako first. Akihiko chuckled under his breath, then nudged Minako in the side again to wake her up. She didn’t wake up right away, but when he saw her struggling to open her eyes, he laughed softly and rested his head against hers.

“Looks like someone is getting too old to be spending days out and about.”

To his surprise, Minako didn’t say anything in her own defense, or try and flip the tables on him. She sat up for half a second before she lost her energy and fell against him again. When she remained silent for several minutes, Akihiko grew slightly worried. It wasn’t like her to be so tired, given she really had been overly excited that day.

On instinct, he lifted his hand to her forehead. “Are you sick?”

She didn’t feel hot, but that didn’t mean she was in perfect health. “No…I’m just really tired.”

Being drowsy was a precursor to being sick. So, he sat up carefully and looped one arm around her back, then placed his other arm under her knees. The action startled her awake. She grabbed his shirt when he managed to get her off the couch, but she was also quick to voice her concern.

“Aki, you shouldn’t be picking me up! You’re hurt!”

He didn’t mind. He had been feeling much better as of late, and his muscles were screaming for him to get back into shape again. After all, if he couldn’t pick up his wife, how was he going to get into a brawl with Shido and all of his friends?

“Aki!”

“I’m fine,” he told her with a smile. “I honestly don’t even feel any pain.”

Minako sighed into his chest, but she said nothing more to him. He wasn’t used to her being so quiet, but he didn’t poke the flame in case she really was tired and sick and needed her rest. It had been a relatively stressful week, both on him and on her, and the future was promising to be just as chaotic and nerve-wracking. And Minako wasn’t used to this level of pressure on a daily basis. It was bound to have some kind of effect on her.

Akihiko carefully lowered her down onto the bed, then promptly grabbed the sheets and pulled them over her. She looked really tired and sad, but he didn’t know what else to do for her. She seemed to take his gesture well enough and he was rewarded with a weak, but genuine smile.

“I’m glad I got to experience my first culture festival with you.”

Akihiko sat himself down in his chair by his desk, turning over his shoulder to look back at Minako. She was getting comfortable in the bed, laying on her side with the blankets pulled up under her chin.

He kept his eyes on her for probably more than he should have, but he wanted to make sure she was actually sleeping and not putting on airs to get him to leave her alone. Minutes went by in silence, but eventually, her breaths evened out and her face relaxed to the point he knew she was asleep.

He may have also had a small heart-attack earlier when she told him she was *tired* and struggled to wake up. She had done it to him once, on the rooftop at school, and that was the last time he thought he would ever hear from her again. He had gotten better about not checking for her pulse a few years into their relationship, but every now and then, that fear seized his heart and made him go numb.

But her breathing continued, and she would squirm around under the blankets like she always would before she hit that deep sleep cycle. It helped him to calm down enough to remember what he was doing before focusing his attention on Minako.

Tsukasa. Right. He had to look into him.

Akihiko did his best to balance making sure Minako was asleep and looking up the criminal who was harassing his daughter. A simple search of the man didn't yield much, like he expected, but he wondered if Tsukasa used that mystery to his advantage. Akihiko might have to call up an old friend or two, head into work for one favor, but he had Fuuka's hacking information to his right. Now, it was time to put it to use.

It was harder than it looked. There was *so much* to type in, to search and find, and the entire time, his mind was yelling at him for being a *criminal* . How Fuuka managed to do all of this for years, he didn't want to know at this point. He was willing to bet by the time he hacked into *one* mainframe, it was going to be a brand new year…

Then, a pop-up on his computer told him that he had been allowed access to the database he wanted, and Akihiko almost pat himself on the back. His first ever hacking attempt had been successful, even if he did go word for word off of what Fuuka had given him. And he was pretty sure the database had the weakest security, but he did it.

Now, he had to get to work. He had no idea how long he had before someone detected him and kicked him off, so he found the search bar and typed in *Tsukasa* and *Kabukicho.* Immediately, Akihiko clicked on the criminal reports that were strangely written up, but there was no investigation. One case had dealt with an underage girl going missing after supposedly working for Tsukasa at his club. However, the girl was known for running away, so the cops didn't look into it. Whether or not the girl was actually found, it was hard to tell.

The second one he pulled up was about a young girl, Makoto's age, telling the police that Tsukasa had forced her to be a sex slave to pay off a debt she had unknowingly walked into while with him. The girl recanted her statement a month later, but Akihiko wondered if that was out of fear or her guilty conscience. He had worked in Kabukicho long enough to know that more times than not, teenagers felt it was their fault. It was always damn near impossible getting anyone to press charges or talk openly about their experiences. So the fact Tsukasa was free a *second* time sadly didn't surprise him.

There were a total of six reports about Tsukasa and underage females. A seventh case had been an altercation with a young man, but both men were equally to blame for the fight, according to the police report. It didn't take too much digging to find that the man who had confronted Tsukasa had been another host in Kabukicho, who's sister had supposedly fallen victim to one of Tsukasa's dirty tricks.

It was enough to warrant more investigation, but Akihiko knew better than to try and use Makoto as bait. He wasn't fully recovered yet, and even if he was, he hadn't been active in weeks. His body wasn't ready for a fight right now. He trusted Makoto, and she might be willing and eager to help in his undercover sting to trap Tsukasa, but it was something he had never thought about doing in the past.

One of his biggest fears was being called to a crime scene and finding one of his daughter's as the victim instead of another girl. To *willingly* involve Makoto in a case like this, he could very well see that scenario playing out. He wouldn't leave her alone, but if Tsukasa was smart enough to evade police in the past and knew the police, then Akihiko worried he *knew* him, which would ruin the operation before it started.

For now, he could talk to Makoto about their plan in the very near future. Tomorrow, they had to focus on Akechi.

Chapter 129

Chapter 129

Makoto had spent *days* preparing for her interview with Akechi, but now, she felt far from ready.

She told herself she couldn't rely on her notes or her questions she had drafted over the days. She couldn't rely on her friends, or her family, or her other peers. It should be a simple question and answer session, but Akechi loved to make things personal for her. Which meant she had to be on her game. One false move, a one second pause of hesitation, and he would eat her alive in front of the people that had respected her for two years.

It didn't help that she was distracted. Tsukasa had been bothering her all night, wishing her the best at her school function. No doubt Eiko had told him about it, but it was creepy being praised by a criminal that shouldn't be speaking to her to begin with. That and she was eager to know what information her dad had found on him, if any, and how they could catch him in his own web of lies.

But that had to wait. Akechi was today's problem. Then, hopefully, the rest of her time could go back to Sae and helping her. Some smaller problems could fill the gap when she got too overzealous.

To her extreme disappointment, her dad told her he would meet her at the festival and didn't take her to school that day. With Akechi popping up at the worst possible times to get under her skin, Makoto was positive he would catch her at the station or right outside of school. Having her dad there would make her feel stronger and smarter. She tried explaining as much to him, but he was quick with a comeback.

"What? You can't manage that little pipsqueak on your own for a bit?"

She did *not* tell him that she had several run-ins with Akechi already which involved her (and now Ren) getting physical with him. She

would *hate* to see how she reacted the next time.

But to her delight, Ren met her at Shibuya Station when she arrived. It was probably a chance encounter. However, when he spotted her, that smug grin didn't go away from when she first saw him standing against a wall in the hallway to their line.

"I figured you could use some cheering up today."

As Ren approached her, she noticed him reach into his bag for something. She figured he was petting Morgana, as the poor cat had to feel trapped being held in such small confines for most of the day. But instead, he pulled out a box, unwrapped, with nothing written on the outside of it. It wasn't until he held it out for her to take it that she realized it was a *gift* .

"I saw it the other day and thought of you. So, maybe it will give you all the confidence I know you don't need, but I want you to have."

She was so touched that she never once reached out to take the box into her hands. It could have been empty for all she cared. His words alone were enough for her. "You didn't have to get me anything special."

Ren found something about her reaction amusing. She was probably blushing, which he *always* found amusing. "I wanted to. Because I'm proud of you. And I know you're nervous about how today will play out, but I want you to know that no matter what happens, even if you think you're going to make a fool out of yourself, you're still my girlfriend. I'll come rushing the stage if I have to rescue you."

She didn't know if she was going to start crying or start screaming in humiliation. She could easily see Ren running up to Akechi on the stand if he said *anything* to upset her or make her feel trapped. Thankfully, she managed to contain both her tears and her screams and reached out with shaky hands to take Ren's present.

"U-Um…t-thank you…"

His eyes were glowing a second later. "Open it up!"

It was strange to be receiving a present from a friend, much less her *boyfriend* . She figured it would be wise to do as he suggested, since he was basically pleading with her to open it. There was no giant bow or gaudy wrapping paper, which she was grateful for, but the object inside the box made her heart stop all the same.

It was a motorcycle figurine she had wanted for months, but life kept happening and she had little time for impulse buys. One hand gripped the box tightly. The other flew to her mouth to try and muffle her startled gasp.

“Do you like it?”

Did Ren *know* she wanted this? Or had he walked by the store, saw the motorcycle, and thought of her? Either way, she felt her eyes water again and this time, she didn’t try and stop them from spilling over. A few seconds later, she used both hands to pull the figurine from the box to admire it. She really hoped he hadn’t spent too much money on it.

“It’s…t-thank you, Ren.”

It was a pitiful thank you, but it did the trick. Ren’s smile stretched over his face and his arm lifted to land across her shoulders. He easily pulled her into his side, and she was careful not to drop her new possession in the process.

“You’re strong, Makoto,” he whispered, very un-Ren like, and her heart skipped a beat. “You’re also really smart. That’s why I know everything is going to be okay. I may not be able to stand by your side every single moment, but I’ll be with you every step of the way. Okay?”

She hadn’t realized she had been crying again until she wiped her face with her free hand. “I-I don’t even know what to say to you…”

It was a little overwhelming. New. Yet not unwelcoming. She needed that morale booster, but she had assumed it would have come from her dad, or her mom, like it had so many times in the past. But it came from Ren. A boy she hadn’t even known for a full year. A boy she had been afraid of at one point, assumed a criminal,

blackmailed, then lied to. She really didn't deserve him.

Makoto was pulled from her thoughts when Ren leaned into her and kissed the crown of her head. "Your expression says it all."

She was going to owe him *so much* by the end of the year that anything she did for him would pale in comparison to his kindness. She didn't even know what Ren would like to receive as a gift. Or if he preferred a quiet night and movies or books or whatever…

She didn't even know if the gift she had for him would bring out a genuine smile or a forced one to make her feel better. She imagined him staring back at her, trying to let her down easily, yet so disappointed in her…

" *Thanks for the effort, but I would have liked so many other things instead…"*

All of her thoughts suddenly made her feel ten times *worse* .

Ren, being Ren, caught her change immediately. "Something wrong?"

Makoto shook her head to the point she thought she was going to be sick. "N-No! It's a beautiful gift. Thank you."

But her answer didn't sit well with Ren. "Do you really not like it?"

The concern in his eyes almost made her drop the present. But, she sighed, the nerves not leaving with her breath like she wanted them to. "N-No…I-I really do like it. I promise. I've actually wanted this for a while now."

"Then why such the long face?"

He could be very persistent, which wasn't *bad* , but it always made her feel guilty. But it was Ren. She could be honest with him… "C-Can I be honest…w-with you?"

The look that came to Ren's face was one that almost had her changing her mind and walking off alone. "O-Okay?"

He released her and she felt too cold without his warmth. “Sometimes I worry I’m not doing enough to make you happy.” It felt wonderful to finally get her feelings out into the open, so she didn’t stop. “You always say endearing comments to me, and I never return them. You go out of your way to buy me things, when I’ve never gotten anything for you. All I really seem to do is provide you with amusement when I get flustered when you do something nice for me.”

She gave Ren a second or two to let her words sink in. After a few more, she started to panic. Did she make sense? Did she say too much? Was all of this off-putting? She should have just kept her mouth shut…

Then she felt his fingers lift her chin up so he could look into her eyes. “What’s wrong with what we have?”

Makoto was a little too quick to answer him. “It’s not fair to you.”

But Ren chuckled under his breath. “That’s crazy. Do you have any idea how lucky I am to even *be* with you? Do you know how many people think you could do so much better than a criminal transfer student who hangs out with Ryuji? Just a minute of your time is all I could ever ask for. Because my time is something I can never take for granted again. So I think it’s plenty fair.”

He really, *really* didn’t make sense sometimes. “I-I don’t… understand…” A minute of her time was all Ren wanted? How was that enough? He always supported her when she was weak, when she was scared, when she dove too far into fixing other people’s problems. And all he wanted in return was to spend *time* with her?

“I know this is all new to both of us,” he started again, his smile slowly disappearing. “But in all honesty, I don’t want anything to change. I just want to be with you.”

It was hard to look away from him when he was being so genuine. She was pretty sure her face was darkening, too. “I…” She lowered her head, her cheeks warm, her heart beating frantically in her chest. “I want to be with you, too.”

The smile she had grown to love seeing on his face appeared again. He was quick to wrap both of his arms around her and hold her tightly against him for a moment. When he released her, the smile was still showing on his face. He held out a hand to her, which she took without hesitation, and walked with her to their train.

“Now, go show Akechi why he shouldn’t mess around with my beautiful and amazing girlfriend.”

A part of her wondered if maybe Ren did enjoy bringing out her blush on purpose. He sure as hell seemed like he did. But being at his side did wonders to calm her down again, to let her focus on her breathing, to remind her that this wasn’t just a personal mental debate with a kid who was intelligent. Her friends were depending on her. Her dad was depending on her. The students were depending on her (for different reasons).

Instead of feeling frightened by the weight of it all, Ren’s firm grip on her hand helped her channel her anxiety into determination. She would do her best. For him. For her dad. For herself.

Just before they arrived at school, Ren surprised her and pulled her into a random hiding spot around the vending machines. She was about to question him when he grabbed her by the back of the neck and kissed her. It was a shock, since they were way too close to the school for comfort, but the longer his lips worked against hers, the less she started to care.

And when she started forcefully kissing him back, Ren broke away from her. “There. Now I know you’re invincible!”

Makoto threw a hand to her head. “W-What?”

She thought she heard him laugh. “Whenever my mind starts running away with me and you kiss me, everything becomes clear again. I figured I could do the same for you.”

He really was too good to her. “O-Oh…” She gripped the box with her figurine closer to her chest. “Y-Yes. Thank you.”

Neither one of them said a word to each other as they finished the

walk to school. Ren at least waved to her with a charming grin before she was pulled away by her council. From then on, her mind had only one goal. She had to stop Akechi from making absurd (and true) comments about her, her family, or her friends. She had to make him uncomfortable, or at least, feeling inferior.

This was *her* school, not his.

These were *her* friends.

It was *her* pride, and she would not be made a fool by Akechi in front of anyone.

Her council was in a buzz. Akechi had already made his appearance and was being shown around the school by one of the other members. The students were apparently following behind him, interested in hearing his version of the Phantom Thief case and why he had fallen off the map with Okumura when he had been right the entire time.

Makoto steeled herself. This was what she had prepared for. And now it was time to put her preparation to use.

An hour later, Akechi was brought into the student council room. Thankfully, she wasn't alone, but she also worried what he would use against her in front of people who *trusted* her.

"Akechi-kun! We are so excited to have you!"

"You've done us all a great honor!"

Makoto kept her comment to herself. Either Akechi didn't notice, or he ignored it. "I'm happy to be here."

She pushed her chair back loudly, drawing the attention off Akechi and onto her. "Well, since you seem to be acquainted with the school, shall we move on to the gymnasium?"

There was a flash of something dark in Akechi's eyes that made her heart race again. His flashing smile was a little *too* flashy. "I'd be more than happy to follow after you, Niijima-san."

So far, Akechi was being his usual, popular, and pompous self. Makoto worried that the second they were alone together, things would take a turn. But she was ready for that. She would honestly be shocked if Akechi *didn't* do anything suspicious, which she had to prepare for as well. She had to keep things simple, flowing, cordial, until the moment presented itself, and then continue her act while setting him up.

And if it never came, it never came.

"You have to keep things friendly. If you start treating him like a criminal, he's going to know your train of thought. Let him set the tone for you."

The walk to the gym was a blur. As she retreated into her mind to remember some random tips her dad had given her, she couldn't stop some of her earlier doubts from resurfacing. If Akechi never dropped a hint for her to pounce on, then how would she get any information?

"If you bite the bait too early, he'll use it against you."

But if Akechi *did* drop a hint, or release a bombshell, how should she react? Should she act stupid? Should she attack him? What was the right thing to *do?*

"Most importantly, never give him the upper-hand. Play your best cards last and ease him into your trap. But keep things simple. Talking too much will only keep him silent."

The gift Ren had given her earlier was in her bag. He gave it to her because she was Queen. The strategist in the Metaverse. The one they all looked to when a battle was getting out of hand and she had to be smart on the spot. It signified his trust in her. It gave her confidence. It made her keep her back straight. It gave her the determination to put this little *pipsqueak* in his place.

"Alright," she said, more to herself than to Akechi, who was standing next to her behind the stage's curtain. "Are you ready?"

Makoto wasn't expecting him to show weakness, or to tell her *no* ,

and he only smiled in response. “Of course.”

She moved like she was a normal person about to interview a famous person she barely knew. Once she was out on the main stage, her eyes did a quick sweep of the area to find the two sights she would need in case things started to fall apart. In the process, she caught Yusuke, Ann, and Haru sitting in the second row; Haru with a warm smile on her face, Ann typing away on her phone, and Yusuke munching away at some festival snack. Ryuji was standing by the wall to her right with Ken, both of whom were talking about something with another student she thought was on the track team.

Her eyes found Ren next. Up on the second-floor balcony with Futaba and Fuuka. The two girls were far too drawn into a shared cell phone, but Ren gave her a simple smile and a nod. She quickly looked away, worried if she kept her eyes on him for long, she would start burning under the spotlight. And she couldn’t have that.

And in the back of the room, almost in the last row of seats, was her mom, her dad, and Mitsuru. Her mom smiled and waved happily at her like Makoto was about to make a valedictorian speech on graduation day. It flustered her almost as much as Ren’s earlier look. She was just grateful that her mom remained seated and didn’t make a scene.

Makoto held her dad’s eyes for a second or two, but she didn’t need him to clap her on the back or pat her on the head. The seriousness in his eyes and the subtle nod of his head was all the praise she needed. He was expecting great things from her, and she refused to let him down.

With that, she took her final few steps to the podium, grabbed the microphone, and waited for the crowd to grow quiet. A minute later, with her heart pounding in her ears, she started to address the audience. It was a simple start, a quick *thank you* and usual introductions, and then it was time to bring the man of the hour out from the shadows behind her.

The students in the crowd clapped loudly as Akechi walked to stand at the vacant podium. Makoto gripped the microphone in her hand almost too tightly and did her best to take a deep breath without

drawing attention.

“Thank you for joining us today, Akechi-kun.” Simple start. *Keep it up.* “As you can see, the student body of Shujin is thrilled to have you with us.”

Akechi’s smile looked so fake, yet so real at the same time. “It’s an honor to be requested to visit. I do hope to live up to all of your expectations.”

To her surprise, the students began cheering and laughing. The praise seemed to go straight to Akechi’s head, which she figured she could use to her advantage. “We all are impressed with your work as a detective, since you’re managing to juggle cases and school. How do you excel at both so effortlessly?”

Akechi beamed and turned to address the crowd. Her eyes found her dad, shaking his head ever so slightly, a slight warning that maybe she was being *too* fake and it was obvious. While Akechi spoke to his fans, Makoto took a second to focus her breath and try and act more like the student council president her classmates thought she was.

If Akechi had said anything incriminating, she missed it. He turned his bright and nauseating smile back to her. “Sometimes, I wish I had a simple life. But there’s a certain… *elegance* in being ignored because of my age, yet depended on for my intelligence.”

Was he trying to say something to her? And if so, *what?* “Are there any special cases where you’ve proven your worth recently?” She chuckled for good measure. “Of course, if you’re at liberty to discuss them.”

That flash was back in his eyes, but that damn smile never faded. She almost felt like she had walked into a trap that he didn’t even set. “Any case in particular? I’ve been involved with many.”

She knew then and there he was baiting her. And while she had an answer ready for him, one of the students in the gym took it upon himself to do so.

“The Phantom Thieves!”

A few others followed after the voice, some even bringing up the principal’s death, until Makoto had to tell them all to settle down and let Akechi make the decision on his own. She wanted Akechi to be open about his information on them, but at the same time, he could *lie* and the student body would be none the wiser. It would be up to her at that point to try and fish for the truth without leading Akechi to call out her suspicion.

Akechi laughed softly as he turned his eyes out to the students. Makoto held her breath and listened to every word, every tone, and watched him very carefully.

“First, do not misunderstand my intentions,” he began softly, politely. “I’m merely here because I was invited, not because of the cases I am working on. While it is believed that these mysterious Phantom Thieves began their attacks at Shujin, that is not why I have come.”

Makoto almost rolled her eyes.

“However, I can tell you this with certainty: The Phantom Thieves are not the ones behind the recent murders.”

Of all things she anticipated Akechi saying, *that* had not been one of them. The surprise of his statement caused her to make a fatal mistake. “But you…”

It was far too late for her to take back her words, and to make it worse, Akechi eyed her with intrigue. He smiled at her, daring her to continue with her thought, and she figured the students were expecting the same at this point.

“But you have always accused the Phantom Thieves of vigilante crimes. Why do you not think them capable of murder?”

She wanted to slap the smile off of his face. It was too smug, too frustrating, and she felt herself losing her cool. “You seem to be proficient at this Niijima-san. Perhaps you learned a trick or two about interrogating criminals from a family member?”

Calm down . It took her a second to calm down enough to reply.

“Are you saying you’re a criminal?”

Akechi threw a hand to his head with a laugh. “Oh, no, you’ve figured me out. Perhaps being this good this young is making some of the older generation feel worried about their job security. And if that’s the case, then yes, I am a criminal.”

The crowd laughed at Akechi’s pitiful joke. Makoto gripped the microphone so tightly she heard it crack. If Akechi was making a personal stab at her sister or her dad, she would pull him back behind the curtain and beat the living hell out of him.

As usual, when she felt she was drowning in emotion, she searched for something to latch to. She found her dad again (finding Ren was too hard to do without making it obvious) and even from a distance, he didn’t look offended or angry or anything.

In fact, she saw him mouth, “Breathe,” so she took the time to do just that. If she let her emotions get the best of her so early on, she would make a fool of herself for sure. She couldn’t be willing to give up just yet.

“Pardon my seriousness,” she began again, trying to calm the crowd and herself at the same time. “I’m only curious as to your train of thought, since the facts around these Phantom Thieves make me think otherwise.”

Akechi nodded once, then faced his audience once again. “Honestly, it just doesn’t make sense. Every single target was known to be a criminal, yet Okumura-san is the only one who dies. In the police field, this is an outlier case, and I have concluded that the Phantom Thieves are *not* the ones responsible for Okumura-san’s death.”

His words took the breath out of her. Was Akechi being serious? Did he really not think her or her friends as killers? And if that was the case, did he *know* how Okumura died, since he was likely the one behind it? Or maybe he wasn’t the black mask guy? He seemed far too truthful. Surely a murderer had to show some level of remorse or guilt or wouldn’t want to talk about the events in front of adoring fans.

But he wasn't done. "If the Phantom Thieves are the same people I know them to be, I can assure you that they did not, and would never, kill anyone."

She was thankful for her earlier grip on her microphone or she would have dropped it. There was no doubt in her mind that Akechi was trying to set her up. But a part of her wanted him to *prove* it. What was he going to do? Tell her school that she had magical powers and could go into someone's cognition and change their hearts? It was ludicrous. No one would believe him, and *he* would look like an idiot.

So, she pushed him. "You speak with certainty." Her eyes locked with his. If she didn't know him, she would think he was friendly and kind. But behind that was a mind racing, eager to outdo her and ruin her reputation with a simple accusation.

"Yes, I do." He suddenly turned serious. Makoto braced herself. "Because I know who they are."

Breathe . She felt proud that she hadn't attacked him yet, or told him off, but she knew that was about to change. The students couldn't just ignore Akechi's claim. They all wanted to know. Akechi was their invited guest. If she changed the subject, it would be rude, and the students would interrupt her for the truth.

"You know who they are?" She tried to sound surprised, but she worried it came off more like disbelief. But Akechi didn't seem to mind, if his growing smile was any indicator. The look he gave her made her heart race and her hands tighten again. He held her eyes for several seconds, and Makoto knew that he was testing her. He had already accused her once of being a member. He likely wanted to know what she would do if he were to tell the entire room his thoughts.

The accusation, while unfounded (in regard to physical evidence), would destroy her credibility. It wouldn't take long for authorities to go after her, her friends, her family. Especially if Sae caught wind of it. But she knew stopping Akechi from speaking his mind would be even more damning in the end.

“Would you like to know?”

Makoto tried as hard as she could to fight back the bile rising in her throat. “If you’re in a sharing mood, I’m sure we’d all like to know.”

His smile almost made her *sick* . “Very well.” Akechi broke eye contact with her and she prepared for the worst.

“The identity of the Phantom Thieves are-,”

A ringing cut through the tension and Makoto jumped in her place. The noise caught Akechi off guard as well, and he apologized and reached into his jacket pocket for his phone.

“Oh. I guess work doesn’t let me have fun. I must take this. Excuse me.”

Akechi pocketed his device while Makoto exhaled to the point she almost fell over. She hoped it wasn’t obvious to Akechi, who was slowly making his way over to her. She straightened her back and lowered the microphone when Akechi came to a stop at her side.

“I planned that call, by the way. So in return for keeping this all a secret, I have a request. I want to meet with your friends. I’m sure if I walked off stage with you, Amamiya would come to your rescue at least, yes?”

The entire thing had been a trap. And she had foolishly and blindly walked into it. She was angry. She could have picked up Akechi and thrown him out to the fans that adored him. The only good thing that came from the entire ordeal was that Akechi never once told anyone who *they* were.

“Fine.” She practically spat at him, which he found humorous in his own twisted way. “I’m sure the drama club wouldn’t mind filling in for us while we use their room for our conversation.”

One day, she would slap that smile off his face and be proud of it. “So diligent and prepared, eh, *Sanada-san?”*

Knowing he was trying to aggravate her further, she ignored him and spoke to the confused and disappointed student body. “I apologize

for the delay, but Akechi-kun has asked for a small recess to attend to some work-related issues. We will be right back."

It seemed to tide over the students, but as soon as Makoto was behind the curtain, it took everything in her power not to punch the lights out of Akechi. "I'll reach out to the others. I'm sure your performance will have them here without my message."

Akechi only smiled and said nothing.

But in her frantic state of mind, she thought of *one* thing that could be that needle in the haystack for her dad to use against Akechi. As soon as she was done typing out her group message, she pulled up her dad's number.

The phone call was planned. Perhaps the caller could be a lead.

Chapter 130

Chapter 130

If Ren could jump over the railing and drop-kick Akechi in the face and play it off as an accident, he would do it in a heartbeat.

Poor Makoto was a nervous wreck. However, it made her seem more like her old self, which was what the student body expected to see. She may have been nervous, but to people who didn't know her, she was surprised and probably excited to be chatting with *the* Goro Akechi.

But he never in a million years would have thought Akechi could tell his fans with all seriousness that the Phantom Thieves were *not* killers. It was *true,* since Akechi was supposedly the one behind them all, but he could have said it for a number of reasons. Akechi wanted Ren and his friends, especially Makoto, to lower their guard. He could have said it to confuse his fans. He could have said it because he felt guilty to some degree…

Ren snapped back to attention when a ringing filled the gym, and Akechi apologized and began to walk off stage. There was an exchange of words between him and Makoto, which almost had Ren flying over the balcony like Joker and treating Akechi like a shadow. Whatever was said greatly upset Makoto, but she did her best to mask it as she asked the crowd for a brief intermission.

When Makoto was out of his sight, his phone buzzed in his pocket. He didn't even need to read it to know it came from her, that she was probably panicking and thinking she did a terrible job, but he pulled it out anyway. He figured the action would calm *him* down, too.

Akechi wants to meet with us. I'll be waiting for you where the drama club meets.

Futaba looked over at him when he released his breath loudly. It had been a group message, but Futaba had been sharing her phone

with Fuuka, doing *something* he didn't quite understand. He showed her the message, and he regretted it, since she suddenly grew anxious.

"It's okay, Futaba," he told her, putting his phone back in his pocket. "Akechi just wants to talk."

"W-What if he *knows?"*

Ren didn't tell her that he probably did, but, "If he wanted to point the finger, he would have already done it. He might be curious, but I doubt he means any ill-will."

She glared at him. "He's a bad guy!"

"How do you know that?"

"Because Papa Sanada said he thinks he's behind the mental shutdowns!"

Ren took a step closer to her when she raised her voice. There was no way Sanada openly told Futaba that, since that would mean Akechi killed her *mother* . However, Ren also knew Leblanc was bugged, and Sanada liked to frequent the café, and likely said something without knowing he was being listened to.

Futaba dropped her head and started playing with her fingers. "I-I'm sorry. I-It's just that…that if Papa Sanada thinks Akechi is bad, th-then I think he is…t-too…"

One, he thought it was adorable that Futaba referred to Makoto's dad as Papa Sanada. Two, he was curious to know when this conversation had taken place, with who, and *why* . Three, Futaba was scared, and it broke his heart. Fuuka was the one who stood next to Futaba and lowered herself to be in her line of sight.

"It's okay, Futaba-chan. We're going to find the truth together. You're doing a wonderful job helping us!" Ren could practically feel the smile from the older woman. "If you keep up the hard work, I know Akihiko will arrest him and you'll be a hero!"

There was a shy smile coming to Futaba's face. Ren took that

moment to chime in. “We’re going to be okay, Futaba. Besides, with both of you on our side, Akechi won’t know what hit him.”

He wanted to tell her that there was still a chance Akechi was innocent, but after the recent display, Ren was more positive he was the black mask culprit. He knew Mitsuru and Sanada seemed to think Akechi was the culprit, but they also said they could be wrong. And on the off chance their suspicions were right, there was so much more to the case.

Akechi was only a puppet. Someone else was the real mastermind.

But for Sanada to make a serious claim against Akechi…

As Ren made his way with Futaba down the stairs and towards where they were meeting Akechi, it hit him. Futaba had told them a few days ago, right before meeting with Makoto’s friends for the first time, that Sanada had asked Makoto’s sister about how she knew about Futaba’s mother. And Futaba told him then that Akechi had known about her mom. And maybe that had been when Sanada warned his daughter about Akechi or had tried to get her to work together to arrest him.

Maybe that was why Minako had asked them to go after her, because she knew her daughter wouldn’t listen to reason anymore. It was a horrible situation to be put into, but if she trusted him enough to name someone so important to her, he would see it through. He *had* to. It wasn’t just about bringing justice to a teenager who killed to keep people quiet.

It was about Futaba, who lost a mother, lived so many years in self-loathing, and deserved answers.

It was about Haru, who lost a father she tried so hard to save.

It was about Makoto and her family, who had so much to lose, but had the courage to make a stand to do what was right.

Ren and Futaba were the first to meet up with Makoto, but Akechi was nowhere to be found. Makoto at least looked more composed, but beneath that, she was furious. He briefly wondered if maybe

Akechi was *dead* and that was why he was missing.

“He’s inside the room around the corner,” she said quietly, as if reading his mind. “He hasn’t said anything, so I’m assuming he wants to wait until we’ve all gathered.”

Futaba moved to stand behind him. Ren took the initiative to ask, “How much does he know?”

“I-I don’t know…” Her head fell to her chest and he desperately wanted to hold her. “He only used your name specifically, so I’m not sure if he actually knows about the others.”

Ren had never been an angry person who thought about using violence against others, but he could have taken a swing at Akechi. Just one. Or until the boy dropped unconscious. “I don’t want them to be here. If he doesn’t know, or only has a guess, I don’t want it to turn into truth.”

Makoto nodded her head while he turned to Futaba. “Go back to Fuuka. Tell the others we will talk about this after school tomorrow. If they ask why they aren’t allowed to be a part of this, tell them it’s to keep them safe. For now.”

“Keep your phone on.” Futaba whipped out her phone and started typing away. “I have a link to your phone that lets me access your photos and microphone.”

Ren was taken aback. “Y-You hacked into my phone?”

Futaba waved him off. “No time! Just don’t block your phone too much or I won’t be able to hear it!”

Morgana shuffled around in his bag. “Keep your bag open so I can listen in, too!”

He sighed in defeat, then put his phone in his bag with Morgana after he silenced it. Ren was known for keeping his hands in his pockets, so if he held onto his phone, Futaba might not be able to hear anything. Now, he just had to hope for the best and pray Akechi didn’t demand to speak to them all…

Makoto was the first one to round the corner once Futaba took off back down the hall. Ren followed behind her, trying to think of something to say to calm her down, but he couldn't find words before she opened a door. It was quiet, no one had been in the halls, and it was the perfect place to have a conversation without prying ears and eyes.

"Ah, it seems I was correct." Akechi smiled darkly at him. "I told Niijima-san that you would be the one to come to her rescue. And here you are."

Makoto either sensed his rage or wanted to make the first move. "I asked him to be here. Now, please don't waste any of our time."

Ren suddenly wanted to reach out and grab her arm and tell her it was okay. He was with her now. They couldn't do anything stupid or it would backfire in their face. He would stop her. She could stop him. Balance.

Akechi, however, looked confused. "I thought I asked to speak to *all* of them." Before Ren or Makoto could say anything, Akechi shook his head. "I guess it doesn't matter, since you both likely don't think I know the full truth. I suppose it would also be rude of me to keep the student body waiting."

A second later, Akechi produced a file, then dropped it onto the table in front of him. Ren assumed it was some sort of documentation, of what, he wouldn't know until he looked at it. Or it could have been Akechi's notes on their movements. Or personal files he had on each of them.

"I would like to show you my evidence."

And Ren felt the ground give out from under him. There were *pictures* Akechi had taken of all of them outside of Okumura's building. A few of them were taken at a perfect moment to capture them fading into the Metaverse. They were well-timed, and anyone who saw them would wonder what had happened. For so long, Ren had always fallen back on the bizarre nature of the situation keeping them safe. But with these pictures, the *evidence,* that safety blanket was gone.

They were now pawns in Akechi's scheme.

"H-How did…did you…?"

Makoto was equally as shocked and horrified as he was. Akechi chuckled at them, all cocky and knowing he had the upper hand. "A true detective needs proof. While I can't explain what has happened, or how you managed this, the experience is one I will never forget."

Akechi's face paled, which caught Ren's attention. The other teen spoke with a shaky voice. "I-I was pulled into that world with you all. Before I could understand what had happened, there was a figure looming over me with a gun. He wore all black. He had a mask over his face. I feared for my life. But before he could pull the trigger, he walked away."

Ren clenched his hands in his pockets. Did Akechi try and pass the blame onto someone else? Did he really think they would believe such an absurd story?

… *Should* they believe it?

Makoto played the role well. "Y-You saw someone?"

Akechi lowered his head. "It was terrifying. Had I not had this encounter, perhaps I would have been more inclined to believe that you were all involved with Okumura's death. But I know evil when I see it. I believe that man is the one responsible."

He wanted to laugh. If he truly felt that way, then he would have said something to them weeks ago. Or right after Okumura died. Why did he wait until he could *blackmail* them if his motive had been genuine? He was tempted to ask, but knew it would cause unnecessary suspicion. And right now, they needed to keep a low profile and let Akechi dig his own grave.

Because if he was the black masked man with a gun that killed Okumura, he did just that. He had just admitted to being in the Metaverse. He had just admitted to having access to Okumura. He had just described the exact person who *killed* his victims. But what he hoped Akechi didn't know was that Ren knew it hadn't been his

first time to the Metaverse, or he wouldn't have understood Morgana all those weeks ago.

"W-We've heard stories…a-about him…" Ren was beyond grateful Makoto was there. She knew what to do, what to say, and knew that Akechi had them trapped. But she wasn't cowering. She wasn't acting defensive. She rolled with it. And she did it well.

"One of our targets, K-Kaneshiro…he mentioned this black mask man before…"

Akechi lifted a hand to his chin, deep in thought. "Interesting. So it would be possible to say that this man could also be the one responsible for the mental shutdowns."

"But why?" Makoto shook her head. "If he wanted to harm us, he would have had plenty of chances to do so, even before our party had sufficient members. At the same time, if his primary goal is to attack us, then why create the mental shutdowns?"

Ren thought he would stay quiet and let the two smart people discuss the issue while listening for contradictions, but he couldn't let Makoto do all the talking. "Maybe he started with the mental shutdowns, then moved to us when we grew too popular."

Makoto turned her eyes to him. "But he didn't attack *us."*

"Sometimes, the greatest way to cause suffering and pain is through emotional turmoil." Akechi lifted his head, his eyes set, and kept his hand on his chin. "With Okumura's death, you all had to deal with the backlash. The police are raising reward money to capture you. There is a great manhunt for you and your friends. With that level of stress and dealing with a lost life, perhaps they expect you to break."

Ren figured that was exactly what *they* wanted to have happen. Hearing about a reward for their arrest was intimidating and unexpected, but with so many people watching over him and his friends, they would know when the police were close. Plus, Ren *trusted* all of his confidants. No amount of money would be enough to have any of his friends come forward with information.

Hopefully…

“So why have you chosen this moment to approach us?”

Ren waited eagerly for Akechi to answer Makoto’s question. The detective chuckled under his breath, then stood up straight. “I will keep these photos to myself, assuming I can ask you for a favor.”

“A favor?”

Akechi’s eyes locked with his. “This is why I wanted to speak to all of your friends. I have a request, someone whose heart I wish for you all to change. I also wish to be a part of the infiltration.”

The tension in the room became unbearable. It wasn’t anything Ren thought Akechi would ask of him, but he would be an idiot to say he wasn’t intrigued. It would have to take precedence over Makoto’s sister, which he really didn’t want to have to do. But Akechi had proof, and he knew cops, and if he was as corrupt as Sanada thought he was, it could end in a disaster if they ignored him.

“Alright,” Makoto said, crossing her arms with a sigh. “In order for us to help, we need a name. However, unless you have the same powers we do, I’m afraid taking you with us could put you in serious danger.”

He could have clapped Makoto on the shoulder and told her he was so proud of her. She looked like she had it all together and planned out and her responses were coming so naturally. She really would make a great interrogator.

“About that.” His eyes returned to Akechi. “I do believe I have a power inside me. Another less frightening beast tried to attack me, which was when I saw a bright light in the form of an arrow take it down. Before I could speak to it, it vanished, and I had a strange new attire.”

Ren was dying to call him out on his *lies* , but he kept the information stored for the future. “You have the power?”

Akechi shrugged his shoulders. “If what happened to me is what you call ‘the power’, then yes, I believe I do.”

Makoto spared him a look, then shook her head again. “Very well. May I ask who it is you want us to change then?”

There was a deafening silence that followed. It was a rare moment where Akechi actually showed some hesitation and appeared to be remorseful. It only added to the never-ending amount of questions Ren had about who this kid really was.

“Please. Do not think ill of me for asking you this.”

He was stalling. “If you have a request, we will hear it,” Ren added, taking a step closer to feign interest. “And maybe once you’ve explained your story to the rest of us, we can make our decision.”

Akechi nodded his head slowly, drawing in a breath as he looked away. “Forgive me, Niijima-san. The person I wish to change…is your sister, Sae-san.”

Ren took a moment to let the words sink in. He expected Akechi to name a family member, or a big-time boss, or someone *different* . He had *not* expected Akechi to name the exact same person they were originally going to go after anyway. It was a devastating twist, but one that couldn’t have come at a better time.

Makoto, however, took it a little *too* personally. “How *dare* you think my sister is a criminal!”

Ren didn’t know what to do. The situation was perfect. If Akechi was the guy with the black mask and they had planned to trap him in Sae’s palace to begin with, then he had just walked right into it on his own. However, having Akechi, their possible enemy, name her himself, made his blood run cold.

“Please, you must have noticed a change in her as well.” Akechi held his hands up in case Makoto lashed out at him. She sure as hell was angry enough to think about it. “She’s not herself. She only cares about a victory. Innocent people are behind bars due to her rage. And as someone who cares about the law, I cannot overlook this anymore. We have to help her.”

“My sister is *not-,* ”

“Makoto.”

When she turned to him, all he saw was the fire burning in her eyes. It took his breath away momentarily, but he was quick to snap out of it. She had every right to be upset, and while it was likely how Akechi thought she would react, she needed to calm down. They were walking on thin ice, and if she lost control of herself, then she could do something to jeopardize her safety and her sister’s.

He heard Akechi sigh in the silence. “Forgive me. I wish to meet with your friends to discuss a strategy. I understand this is a terrible time to ask this of you, but I consider Sae-san a friend. And a good friend must be willing to set them straight when they have lost their path.”

Makoto wisely chose to remain quiet as Akechi bowed to them both. Ren figured it would be a good time to end the conversation so Makoto could calm down in peace. He suddenly realized he didn’t have his phone within reach, so he walked up next to Makoto and tried to act like a good boyfriend.

“We can meet tomorrow after school at Leblanc, if that works for you,” he said to Akechi, moving an arm around Makoto’s back. She quickly threw her head into his chest. “I can meet you at Yongen-Jaya and walk you there.”

There was still a sad look on Akechi’s face that *almost* made him believable. “I’ve actually been a few times in the past. It’s a wonderful place that Sae-san introduced me to.”

Another interesting fact to store for future use.

Ren offered him a nod. “I’ll get your number from Makoto tomorrow and we can plan from there.”

Akechi bowed to them again, gathered his evidence, and made his way to the door. “I promise you, Niijima-san, no harm will come to your sister. I stake my life on this promise.”

With another sorrowful bow, Akechi walked out of the room.

Makoto was quick to throw herself off of Ren. She was fuming, but he didn’t know if it was cute or dangerous. “He has to come with us.

If we can keep an eye on him at all times while we investigate Sis's palace, he won't be able to hurt her. We'll be able to see his power up close. He won't be able to bother my family, or Sis, or blackmail any of us."

Even with all her anger and hidden desire to murder Akechi, she could still think out a plan of attack. "You're really cute."

The anger vanished from her eyes and the tension in the room literally disappeared. Her eyes widened in surprise, and he couldn't help but laugh at the blush rising to her face. "W-What?"

He closed the distance between them and used the absence of his friends to his advantage. One arm wrapped around her back and the other lifted to the side of her face. Any lingering amount of anger was gone completely when he leaned in and kissed her.

The only reason he pulled away as quickly as he did was because Morgana had been shifting around in his bag. But the kiss did what he wanted it to. Makoto moved her arms around his back and fell against him like she had lost a great deal of energy. He noticed that her breathing had returned to normal, and he was content to just sit there for the rest of the day.

"Ren!"

Morgana had other plans for him. "Sorry."

He reluctantly pulled away from Makoto to try and let Morgana out of his bag. The cat only popped his head out, his bright blue eyes glistening with excitement. "We need to meet with the others!"

"I-I should probably speak to the students."

Whether or not she wanted him to, Ren followed behind her back to the gym. He knew they all needed to have a serious discussion about what had happened, but he also knew Futaba had likely informed the rest of them of what was happening. Plus, there was still so much time left of the culture festival, and he wanted to make the best of it.

When Makoto walked off to resume her duty as student council

president (he gave her a quick kiss after a promise to meet back up afterwards), he reached for his phone in his bag. Not surprisingly, Ryuji was the one who was blowing up his phone in a panic. It meant that Futaba had done what he had asked, but now he feared a meeting was necessary *now* .

We can meet at Leblanc tonight after the festival. For now, we stay at school and act like nothing happened.

Easier said than done, of course, but any moment he got to share with Makoto outside of the Metaverse and school was considered a blessing. He would make sure to make the most of it.

Chapter 131

Chapter 131

Ren should have known that he wouldn't have much alone time with Makoto at a school function.

While it wasn't her *job* to make sure the student body was happy after the shocking news that their prized guest had to leave, it was who Makoto was. He respected her for it, even if she took it to the extreme sometimes. He knew better than to ask for more of her time. She was busy and the students really did appreciate her hard work.

It was just that he knew she was still upset, and he couldn't be there for her like he wanted to. He may have been too pushy and demanding, and maybe she preferred diving into work to avoid *feeling* . But he wanted to spend the day with her, to give her a reason to be happy, and she kindly told him that she had to work…

Akechi really liked to pop up and ruin a lot of things recently.

"Ren!"

He jumped hearing his name, realizing he had been sulking in the middle of a deserted hallway. He didn't drop his phone, thankfully, but he turned to look over his shoulder at the voice who had called out to him. "M-Minako?"

He hadn't expected to run into her at the school, but she smiled brightly at him as she stopped in front of him. "Everything okay?"

Could she tell? Or was she referring to Akechi's well-played visit? Had she been there for that? "What makes you ask?"

She gave him a knowing look that oddly made him feel small. "Well, you zoned out here alone, in a hallway, and I figured Makoto would be here with you."

At least he knew which topic she figured he was concerned about. “She has to work, I guess.”

“So you’re going to walk around by yourself?”

He had friends he could ask to hang out with, and he should have, but he was still slightly upset that he couldn’t spend this time with Makoto. “I’ll meet with a friend.”

Minako beamed at him again, grabbed him by the arm, and almost pulled him off his feet. “I’ll be your friend.”

It was strange to know this was Makoto’s mom. She was so different than her daughter. While Makoto was full of life at times when she was fighting, she was much more reserved and soft spoken. Makoto was a splitting image of her, but other than that, she acted much more like her dad.

Maybe Minako had the same struggles when she was in high school and dating Sanada. “Can I ask you something, maybe a little too personal?”

She didn’t even blink at his quiet voice. “Ah, c’mon, Ren. There’s no such thing as a personal question amongst friends!”

It was nice to hear, but he doubted it. “I think Makoto’s intimidated by our relationship. And I was wondering…if maybe…you knew how to deal with it, since she takes after her dad.”

He noticed her grip on his arm lightened, so he hoped he hadn’t offended her. She lost a lot of that energy that he would cling to sometimes, but never once did she release him or stop walking.

Then, he worried that maybe Makoto never told her parents they were dating and now he had just made a serious mistake. “I-I’m sorry. Forget I said anything.”

But she still didn’t let him go. “Don’t do that.” At least there was a small smile on her face, even if he didn’t know *why* . “You just caught me off guard is all.”

He sighed heavily. “I just…I don’t know who else to talk to. My

parents haven't spoken to me since I left. My friends don't know, at least, we haven't told them. And her dad would murder me."

Hearing her chuckle, Ren managed to look back over at her. He realized that they had stopped walking. Then, he worried that maybe he had said too much. He didn't want her to think of him as a member of her own family because Makoto was *her* family. But the words always came out of his mouth so easily around her. It was weird…

"Makoto has been very sheltered for years," Minako said quietly, her eyes on the floor and a sad smile on her face. "I guess it was a price to pay for Akihiko's concern for their safety. And maybe now I'm starting to see the damage it's done to her."

"I didn't mean it like that," he replied quickly. "Nothing *bad* is happening. I just-,"

"It's okay, Ren." Minako let herself lean back against a wall, her eyes looking up and down the hallway to see if anyone was coming. "To answer your question, yes, Makoto takes after her dad. He was very shy and reserved when I realized he started to like me, and even when we were dating, he kept more to himself. It was all new to him, but he didn't treat our relationship like his next biggest adventure. However, that didn't mean he didn't love me."

Maybe Ren was overthinking. Maybe Makoto did want to be with him, but didn't know how, since it was probably something she never anticipated happening so suddenly. "She told me this morning that she didn't think it was fair for me to buy her things or say she was cute all the time because she didn't do it in return. I tried telling her that her time was all I wanted, but I don't think it got through to her."

Minako chuckled sadly. "That doesn't surprise me. She's not used to that kind of affection from someone that's not her family. And again, I feel like that's my fault."

"I don't mean to blame anyone."

She shook her head. "If I can give you a simple piece of advice: be patient. She's growing and learning things that she's been denied

over the course of several years. I had to do the same with her father. And I'll warn you, it's *not* easy."

He couldn't help but laugh at that. "But if it's worth it, you endure, right?"

"He was lucky I didn't strangle him to death, but yes." There was a happier smile stretching over her face. "And just like you, time is the most important thing to give. I'm sure Makoto needs some time to process it, but I can assure you that she very much adores you."

He could feel a warmth rising to his face. "Oh?"

"She speaks very highly of you." Her smile turned more amusing. "You give her hope when I feel like she's losing her strength. You've given her a place to feel like she can be herself with no ulterior motive. It's not my place to tell you how she really feels, but I can see the look in her eyes. So while you both will face your fair share of road bumps, buckle up and enjoy the ride. It's all worth it in the end."

Ren never thought that he would feel so *connected* with someone he never met until recently. It didn't matter that she was a wild card at one point in time, because she was a *good* person. Even with their age difference, he could talk to her like she was his best friend. She didn't judge him for feeling the way he did or for not doing more to make her daughter happy. In fact, she seemed to be more understanding than he thought.

"Buckles are lame," he added, trying to bring some humor to a heavy conversation. "Where's the fun in that?"

Minako's reply came quickly. "Oh, Makoto wouldn't let you drive without a seatbelt. She might be timid, but when she knows you're wrong, she'll jump down your throat without hesitation."

He wouldn't doubt it, but the image made him laugh. "I guess I could see that."

Before either of them could speak up again, his phone vibrated in his pocket. He apologized to Minako, who didn't mind at all, then

pulled out his phone.

It was a text. From Makoto.

Can we hang out?

Minako's earlier words crept back into his mind. *Be patient.* He looked back over at her, and without even knowing the context of his message, she *knew* .

"I should try and find a snack or two before Aki finds me. He *never* lets me eat too much sugar in one day, and I'm determined to do just that here!"

He didn't let her get too far away before he called out to her. "Thank you, Minako." Then, he pointed to the opposite hallway. "I'm pretty sure the third years are still hosting their food stalls. Saving for college or something like that. You could get your fix in on the first floor."

In an interesting turn of events, Minako grabbed him and hugged him to the point he heard his back crack. "You're my hero, Ren!"

She released him the next second, offering another smile he had come to enjoy seeing. Makoto really was an exact replica of her, and he was hoping that one day, she would smile as happily as her mom did just now.

"Have fun, Ren."

With that, Minako took off down the hall to the stairs he had pointed to. It was funny, in some regards, knowing that she was a rebel and so determined over something as mundane as *candy* . Makoto didn't strike him to have a sweet tooth, but he had yet to ask or find out himself. He only assumed by now, he would have known. The only indication she liked any amount of sugar was because when he made her coffee the two times he had, she liked it with cream and sugar.

For now, he was content with following Minako's advice and letting things work themselves out. So long as he was allowed to be with Makoto, he would be happy. She could have turned him down,

ignored him, focused on her duties and her family, but she still allowed him to be a part of her life. That was enough.

He replied back to her message, asking her where to meet her at, to which she told him she was at the gym. He tried not to get too excited, but he had believed his day was going to be boring and riding solo unless he met up with another friend. Not that he wouldn't have enjoyed his time with one of them, it wasn't the same. It was Makoto's last year at school. It was his last year at Shujin. Why not spend school functions together?

Ren found Makoto standing outside the gym's double doors, and he all but raced up to her with a smile. "You miss me?"

Her eyes found his, but his heart cracked seeing the small amount of sorrow she tried to hide. "Um…"

"Are you okay?"

Maybe he shouldn't have left her alone. Maybe he should have followed her as she worked. She had been pretty upset after Akechi left…

Makoto lowered her head, like she was hiding from him. "I…I hope you're not mad at me…"

Her words made him step closer to her. "Why would I be mad?"

"B-Because…" She took a deep breath and released it. "Because I know you wanted to walk around with me, and I told you no. But here I am, asking if it's okay."

Although she didn't see it, he smiled at her. "Maybe we should have a nice conversation somewhere no one can find us."

Since Makoto didn't see his smile, he worried she thought he was irritated with her, or upset with her. She began to wander off towards the doors to get back inside the main building, but he was too nervous to stop her. Instead, he quietly followed behind her, trying to remember that Makoto wasn't used to the praises from someone she didn't know her entire life. If he wanted to express how much he cared about her, he had to consider her emotions as well. After all,

he didn't want to bombard her and have her breakdown because she didn't know how to handle it all.

He never said a word to her until it was just the two of them, standing outside the school on the rooftop she had warned him to stay off of. He waited for her to say something, to give him an idea of how to talk to her, but the minutes passed, and she remained quiet. Her head never once lifted from her chest.

Finally, it became too much for him. "Will you look at me, Makoto?"

It took her a few seconds, but she finally did as he asked. He wished she hadn't. She had tears lining her eyes and a frown on her face. She looked like she was struggling to keep herself in check when all she wanted to do was fall apart. He had no idea what had happened while he was away from her, but it broke his heart.

Did she really think he hated her? Because she had told him she had work to do?

He slowly started to realize he wasn't the only person who fell victim to their own mind. "Do you think I'm going to leave you?"

When her hands covered her face, he was at her side the next second. He wrapped an arm around her shoulder and used his other hand to grab one of her wrists. He tried to laugh quietly, to calm her down, but it didn't work.

So, he chose to let her cry quietly while he got his feelings off his chest. "I'm never going to leave you. I promise. Even if you ask me to, I would fight for you. I'm never going to forget how I first met you, when I was terrified and angry and hating most of humanity. You reached out to me, not knowing who I was, and I think I kind of clung to that sense of security."

He was grateful that she had calmed down a little in his arms, but he didn't stop talking. "And even when you upset me with the whole stalking incident, I knew it was because something was wrong. And ever since then, I've wanted nothing more than to be someone you could depend on, to trust, to talk to."

“I-I…” He gave her a moment to collect herself, but she was still pressed firmly into his chest. “I *lied* to you!”

“Maybe,” he said softly into her hair. “But you had a reason. And it’s not your fault. Plus, we’ve come so far since then.”

Her sobs started all over again. “You’re upset with me.”

He figured it was time to officially come clean with her. “Sometimes, I worry that maybe I’m annoying you by being who I am. You’re an amazing person, although quiet and reserved, but I do enjoy being with you. You make me fight back. You make me feel like I have a million people standing behind me when I have nothing. Simply being in your presence is enough for me to think I can face all of my problems with a renowned sense of pride. No one else does this to me.”

She tried pulling away from him, but he only allowed her to go so far. “I do nothing for you. I don’t know how. You say nice things to me. You buy me things. But…”

“Makoto,” he said with a smile, grabbing her chin to keep her eyes on his. “I know this is all new to you, and I’ll stop if it really bothers you. But something I’m not going to stop is being with you. Because if I let you walk away from me, I’m going to lose half of myself as well.”

Makoto was quiet, but he allowed her to bury her face in his chest again. “S-Stop it…”

At least he knew she was being quiet because she was embarrassed and not because she was upset. “I mean it.” Then, he did something that took *him* by surprise. “I love you.”

From his earlier conversation with Minako, he thought it would be wise to move *slow.* Even when he wanted to push Makoto up against a wall and go from there, or take the opportunity that had presented itself in Hawaii, he told himself to take his time. He cared for her. He didn’t want to freak her out. He didn’t want her to regret anything about their time together.

But he may have crossed a line with a word like *love* . Did he mean it? Of course. He had stayed up several nights looking up the word, then realized it was something he would *know* when it hit him. And here he was, feeling warm, content, *happy* when he thought he would have been a nervous *wreck.*

It may have been too soon to admit, but that didn't make it any less true.

Makoto didn't release him, but she did look up at him with a confused look. "W-What?"

Suddenly, he felt a burning in his heart that he had never felt before. "I love you. I love the way I feel with you. I love everything about you. I love not knowing what the future holds for either of us, but I know you'll be right there with me. And I love being able to be on your mind for even one second of your day."

The warmth in his heart spread to his face like wildfire. He really hoped she didn't notice, or comment on it. But she was too distraught and on fire herself to say anything. Her face was pressed against his chest again.

"Y-You…You *love* me?"

Was it too soon? He had only known her for several months, but those several months felt like years. They saw each other every day. They interacted every day. They fought side by side and faced *death* for most of that time. It may have been too sudden to admit for a normal person, but their time was not something to take for granted. Nor was his freedom.

Plus, it felt so *right.* "I do. And I will tell you that every single day of the rest of my life, if you let me, anyway."

He felt her arms tighten around his torso, almost to the point it *hurt* . But it elated him at the same time. He didn't expect her to come right out and say that she loved him, too, especially since she was someone who responded better with actions than words. And he was perfectly content with that. It wouldn't change how he felt. It wouldn't change how *she* felt. And he would face any and every

speed bump that tried to slow their relationship down because she would be right there with him.

“I-I…” Ren held his breath, hoping that she didn’t repeat what he had said because he had said it first. “I will let you…u-until you d-don’t want too…”

He could have melted into her, but he settled for a quick kiss to the top of her head. “That would mean the world to me.”

Makoto held on to him with more force than he thought he could handle, but he didn’t tell her to stop. It honestly meant the world to him. He never thought he would be able to trust to these kinds of lengths after what had happened back home. Yet here he was, willing to throw his heart to the one girl who literally stole it from him, ecstatic.

“I…u-um…” Ren loosened his hold on Makoto so she could speak to him. Her eyes remained lowered, and he allowed her that time to herself. “I-I have something for you…”

His first question had been when in the world would she have had time to get him a gift, but he shook his head. It didn’t matter. The thought was what mattered most to him. “Oh?”

He let her pull away from him completely so she had easier access to her bag. Ren watched with bated breath as she produced a medium-sized box. It intrigued him, and he hoped she hadn’t gone so far out of her way to find a gift for him to call them even.

“H-Here…”

To say Ren wasn’t curious was an understatement. The light blush on Makoto’s features made him that much more eager. “This is very sweet of you.”

She chose to say nothing and turned away from him to hide her darkening face.

He carefully opened up the wrapped gift to find a box similar to the one he had given her, but much larger. He managed to open the box with one hand while Makoto kept her eyes anywhere but on him.

Ren had no words for what he found on the inside. It was a book. A recipe book. For how to make hundreds of different foods with the simplest of ingredients.

Makoto took his silence the wrong way. “I-I know it’s strange…b-but I thought you l-liked cooking…a-and you always talk about having a million simple ingredients and I saw it and thought you would like it…”

She had to have bought this previously. She didn’t wander off school campus in the few hours he wasn’t with her to find this. Meaning she had wanted to give him something before he had given her that motorcycle figurine.

He didn’t tell her it was his first present from a girl who wasn’t his mother. “I-I don’t know what to say,” he said with a smile so wide the words probably didn’t come out of his mouth right. “This is awesome. Thank you!”

Makoto appeared taken back by his excitement, but he didn’t let her think for long. In a second, he was pressing his lips against hers again, ignoring the way her body stiffened at his actions, knowing she would come around soon enough.

And she came around with a vengeance.

He didn’t even care. They were alone for the most part, so whatever her body wanted to do, he would respond in kind. Her hands flattened against his chest, then her fingers curled around the fabric of his shirt to pull him closer to her. In return, one of his hands dropped to her lower back, guiding her to sit on his lap, while his other hand pulled her closer to him at the base of her neck.

It started out sweetly enough, but then he wanted more of her. He wanted her against him so he could feel her with every nerve of his body. It was like they were both the opposite end of a magnet, easily being pulled into the other without any force required. His mind blanked. He only lived through her, the way she felt, the way she made *him* feel…

Her hands were in his hair, trying to pull him closer.

His hands were gripping the edge of her shirt, not willing to let the barrier keep him from experiencing *her.*

But when his fingers managed to slide under her shirt and he touched bare skin, he panicked. Immediately, he withdrew his hands, but was quick enough to catch Makoto before she fell off his knees. Her eyes widened at him, and he felt he owed her an explanation.

“S-Sorry…” It was a fine line he didn’t want to cross. Did he want to keep going? Of course. What teenage boy would be stupid enough to stop when their crush seemed more than willing to continue on? But he reminded himself he had to take it *slow* . There were a million other ways to show his love for her, in a safer and more isolated space, and without the undertones he was *sure* she had picked up on.

“Why are you sorry?”

Gods he really didn’t want to answer her. It was hard enough admitting what she *did* to him, let alone what he was doing in the moment. However, past experiences made him quick to be honest with her. “That was amazing. Maybe a little *too* amazing, you know?”

He thought she was going to get upset with him, or shake her head because she *didn’t* understand. Instead, she smiled, resting her head against his, and loosely draped her arms over his shoulders. “You’re amazing, Ren.” She didn’t leave it at that and leaned in to kiss his forehead. “And I love you, too.”

For the first time in his life, he was so overcome with emotion that he was rendered speechless. And he was okay with that.

Chapter 132

Chapter 132

“Anything?”

Fuuka shook her head while Akihiko sighed in defeat. “I’m sorry. If I would have known he was going to get a call, I would have been more alert.”

He sure as hell wouldn’t *blame* her, but Makoto’s text had given him a sliver of hope. He should have known better. “It’s alright. I appreciate the attempt.”

“It’s not all lost to the wind,” she replied, her eyes down to her phone again. “If I can pinpoint the location of the caller, it might give you another lead!”

It would be a lead he would have to physically follow up on, and that was something he wasn’t sure he wanted to do. As of now, the world assumed he was down for the count. Shido and his minions thought they had won. Following one of them around to track a lead on something as weak as a phone call to a teenager he had been investigating would land him in more trouble than it was worth.

“It’s alright, Fuuka.” He leaned back against the wall, crossing his arms over his chest. “While it would be fantastic to track Akechi from his phone, I doubt that would work. He uses it far too often, so he’d be bound to notice something off.”

Fuuka smiled back at him weakly. “I’m offended, Akihiko.”

He didn’t *mean* to sound offensive. “Um. I’m…sorry?”

She giggled into her hand. “What I’m trying to say is that we can easily plant a tracking device on his phone. We can listen to and monitor his outgoing and incoming calls and texts. It wouldn’t be hard at all!”

Fuuka noticed the blank stare he gave to her and laughed again. “Huh?”

“Leave it to me, Akihiko.” She balled her fist up like she was going to punch him. He may know nothing about technology, but he knew she would break her hand if she really did strike him the way she clenched her fist. “This is my specialty. Trust me.”

He could only offer a nod of his head. Fuuka smiled brightly at him, then added, “After all, I’m learning a lot from Futaba-chan. She’s really smart. I’m glad I got to know her.”

The two of them had been oddly secretive about their missions around the town, their phones, everything that now made Akihiko grow worried. “I hope you’re both staying out of trouble.”

She laughed softly. “You only get in trouble when you get caught, right?”

While he agreed with her, he didn’t like the implication. “Just let me know if you learn anything, alright?”

Fuuka nodded her head. He figured she would be his best bet to learn anything new about Akechi. His actions at the festival made Akihiko more interested in what he knew and *how* he knew them. Makoto may be able to fill him in on that part of it later, but Minako wanted to head back home. Something about letting Makoto have some free time, or something?

He said goodbye to Fuuka when they left the school. Minako and Mitsuru were waiting for them by the gates, and the second he was left alone with Minako, he oddly felt like a child again. He felt her fingers lace through his own and she leaned against his arm as they started walking to the station. Mitsuru had offered them a ride, but Minako was the one who told her that she wanted to see more of the sights on their way back. Akihiko really wanted to head home and get to work on something more serious, but he knew better than to deny her anything now.

She had a blast at the culture festival. She probably thought she was younger, living a high school dream they had both been denied,

and a part of him was eager to spend more time with her. He had no idea where she wanted to go, but he would follow her anywhere she took him.

“So,” he started weakly, catching Minako’s attention. She smiled up at him. He had to clear his throat. “Where do you want to go?”

She was quiet for a few seconds, likely enjoying his stutter, but then she leaned back into him. “I just want to be with you.”

That pang of regret he kept hidden roared back to the surface. But he refused to let it consume him. Not when she was in such high spirits. He just didn’t know what to say back to her, so he opted for silence. If he sensed her pulling him in a direction, then maybe he would pick her brain a little bit more. But for now, he was content. She was content.

He was reminded that the simplest things made him the happiest.

They missed the train to head back into Shibuya, but Minako didn’t seem to mind. She at least gave him some space in front of a crowd, but their hands remained locked between them. It was strange, to be standing on a platform and not have his mind running a mile a minute. He was calm, relaxed, enjoying the peace in the midst of a chaotic mess.

It was one of her powers. Minako could get him to blank completely with a simple touch. A look could make him forget how to breathe, or talk, or think. But she always knew when to reach him. She always knew when he was standing on the edge of a cliff and was about to lose his footing. It made him stronger. It made him smarter. It made him push forward. He wouldn’t be half the man he was now if he never fell in love with her.

Sometimes, he wondered if he had a similar kind of power over her.

“Whatcha thinking about?”

Akihiko snapped back to attention, which pulled out a quiet laugh from Minako. His face threatened to darken, so he coughed into his hand and looked away. He doubted she *didn’t* notice. “I was…just

thinking about how happy you make me."

He missed the surprise flash across her face, but he could feel her reaction in the hand that he held. By the time he managed to look back over at her, the surprise was gone and replaced with a full-blown smile. She chuckled, hiding the rest of her facial expressions by burying herself back into his arm.

When she said nothing, his heart began beating faster again. Minako always had a witty comeback or had the final word. Knowing that she couldn't do either, or anything for that matter, made him feel like yes, he did have a special kind of power over her thoughts and actions, too.

It sucked that he had lost so much time being afraid and had missed out on so much more of this. If it was helping him now, when he was at one of his lowest stages of life, then he would have been so much stronger in the past. He would have been able to feel strong enough to protect his family from any problems. He could have kept a relationship with Sae…

And now, he had to fight her, face the very real fear that she was too far deep in trouble, and could lose her in the blink of an eye.

"Everything is going to be okay, Aki."

Akihiko stiffened hearing his name, but Minako gripped his hand tightly. Of course she would pick up on signs of his concern without a single word. He was *terrible* at hiding that from her, or she was too good at sensing his mood changes. Either way, he had to perk back up. He wouldn't allow his past mistakes to keep ruining the future she was willing to give him.

"As long as you're with me," he whispered into her hair. "I know I'll be okay. Thank you."

The train arrived a minute later and the silence fell back around them again. He kept a tight hold of her hand, letting her know that he needed her, no matter who was watching or noticed. Let word get back to Shido that he was out and about with his wife. He didn't care. He would keep Minako safe until the day he died.

Once they were off the train in Shibuya, his afternoon went into a tailspin.

“Oh. How interesting to see you here, Sanada.”

Minako released his hand immediately, and a part of him desperately wanted to reach for her. She didn’t need to be afraid of Akechi. Akihiko could punch his lights out if he really felt the need. Hell, Minako could, too.

“What a surprise.” Akihiko tried not to roll his eyes. He hoped it got Akechi talking as to why he had decided to call out to them at all.

The teenager bowed to them, something that Akihiko wasn’t expecting. “I apologize for the interruption. It’s just been a while since I’ve seen you. I’m glad to know you’re doing well.”

If he’s Shido’s eyes and ears, you have to tread carefully. “I’m managing.”

Akechi’s eyes met his, then turned to Minako. When his lips twisted into a smile, something poked Akihiko in the stomach. “I may not know your reasons, Sanada-san, but keeping a beautiful woman like this a secret must have been very upsetting for her.”

His hands clenched at his side. There was a point to this conversation. Akechi never just stopped him to say hi. With his attention shifted to Minako, Akihiko worried he was going to yell at the teen if they didn’t walk away now.

Minako, however, wasn’t willing to do the same. “Who said anything about him keeping me a secret?” She breathed out a laugh. “And here I thought you were a great detective. But you know nothing.”

Akihiko grabbed her wrist and thought it best to get the hell away from Akechi now. Why Minako wanted to instigate something with a teenager, he had no idea, but it was dangerous. One false slip up was all it would take to make him snap.

Akechi thought little of the undertones, even if his eyes darkened with amusement or rage. He couldn’t tell. “My apologies. At least now I know where Makoto truly gets her reserved temper from.”

Hearing him say his daughter's name with ease made Akihiko take a step forward. There was also a hidden message in Akechi's words that made him sick to his stomach. How would he know that Makoto had a temper at all unless he had somehow provoked her? Had he? Why wouldn't she have told him?

"And I'm eager to see if Sae's palace was born because of the stress of the job or because of her hatred towards parents that abandoned her."

It took every ounce of strength and muscle in his body not to reach out and strangle Akechi. He took a deep breath, releasing it just as slowly as he had inhaled, and tried to keep his anger out of his tone.

"Is that why the two of you bonded? Because *your* father abandoned you?"

Akechi lost his smile, his eyes narrowing further for every second of silence. It was the sign Akihiko was looking for, knowing that he had hit a nerve, but it was scary at the same time. Akechi was far from intimidating, even when he wanted to be, but there was no longer any doubt in his mind that this teen had the capability to *murder* .

Akihiko tried to reel it back, worried that he had pushed Akechi too far and now he had added more danger to his family. "I know about what happened to your mother."

He wasn't one to be nervous around young people. However, the longer Akechi remained silent, that subtle aura growing darker with every breath, he figured it would be best to tackle the subject another day.

He didn't get too far before Akechi spoke back up. "I suggest you keep one eye open at night, Sanada."

The threat sounded so much more disturbing than it should have been. "Why? Are you going to try and kill me in that other world again?"

Akihiko waited for an answer, or another look of surprise, but he got nothing. Instead, Akechi turned his eyes back to Minako, which led

him to step into his line of sight. “It was a pleasure to see you again.”

Once Akechi walked off, Akihiko felt an imaginary barrier lift off his chest and he could breathe again. He hadn’t anticipated running into Akechi, especially after his actions at the festival, but now he worried that maybe he said something to Makoto to scare her. It wasn’t too big of a deal that Akechi knew his relationship with Minako or his children, but now he was terrified of how he would use that against him.

Especially if he really was the guy with the black mask.

He could enter Sae’s palace. He could *kill* her. And he would now.

They could discuss the new dilemma with Makoto and her friends when they all figured out how they would approach the task. As of now, he needed to get Minako back home, away from angry eyes, away from unknown threats. He thought about turning around and going back to the school to pick Makoto up, or to grab his phone and call Sae, but Minako grabbed his arm first.

“Don’t let him get to you.”

He sighed heavily. “If he really is the culprit, then we’ve just tipped him off that we’re on to him.”

“Let him know.” He shot a look down to her. “He’ll get nervous. He’ll mess up. He’ll fail spectacularly.”

It was a common police tactic to pile on the pressure, but on someone as deadly as Akechi, it could have been too much. “Or he’ll do the unthinkable and someone is going to get hurt.”

He felt her chuckle into his arm. “Aki, I know you’re worried. Maybe I said too much. But don’t forget who we fight with, who we fight for, and who *we* are. He doesn’t stand a chance, even with the friends he supposedly has.”

Minako was likely just as nervous as he was, given that Sae was their daughter, so it had to have taken a great amount of courage to reiterate that everything would be *okay* . So, he smiled down at her, took a stronger hold of her hand, and began their walk back to their

connecting line.

Would Sae talk to him if he asked her to meet him again? Just to be safe? He also wanted to get some answers from Makoto. If Akechi had said anything to her at any time, he needed to know. He could use Fuuka's help tracking Akechi's movements, and Aigis could keep closer tabs on Sae and learn something of use. Anything he could do to keep his family safe and keep the upper hand, he would do. He *had* to do.

"That was quite a reaction from him, don't you think?"

It had been. If Akechi thought his mother's suicide was a form of abandonment, then what would that say about his father? A man no one knew? Had Akechi found out and now he was acting out some sort of revenge? And how, if at all, did it include Shido?

"It was," he said quietly. "I don't know much about him, but if he feels like he was disowned by his parents, it would explain his rage and connection with Sae."

Minako grabbed his arm and forced him to turn to face her. Her eyes narrowed at him, and he had no idea why she looked so angry. "Stop thinking you *abandoned* her. You loved her from the moment she screamed at you until she walked out of your life, and you *still* love her."

It startled him, but once her words sank in, he exhaled in relief. "I-I know…"

"And Sae isn't going around killing people in her hatred. She's still there. I know it."

Akihiko saw the emotion shining in her eyes and pulled her into him. She gripped at his shirt, but she never started crying. They would save Sae. They would keep Akechi from hurting anyone again. They would get to the bottom of this damn conspiracy and finally find answers.

Thankfully, the rest of the way back home was uneventful and quiet. Minako went straight into the kitchen, likely to work out her

frustrations. Akihiko didn't wander too far and dropped to the couch. He pulled out his phone, hoping to find the strength to send a message to Sae, and to Makoto, and maybe to Mitsuru to let her know about the run in with Akechi. He sent a message to Mitsuru first, knowing that would be the easiest one to send. Another went to Makoto, a stern warning that as soon as she was done at school, she had to return home.

The message to Sae took him at least ten minutes to word to his liking. Akihiko never was a fan of texting, but knowing Minako was right around the corner, he didn't want to call Sae and have that upset her. Plus, he only wanted to get a simple message across, and there was no guarantee that Sae would pick up her phone.

Please be careful around Akechi.

To avoid a nervous breakdown waiting for her to reply with something, Akihiko pocketed his phone and turned the TV on for background noise. It didn't stop his mind from racing. Regardless of if Akechi was the black mask person Makoto and her friends thought killed Okumura, he was still dangerous. There was still an unknown connection to Shido. There was still something that wasn't making *sense.*

His mind was jolted out of his thoughts when Makoto finally returned home an hour or two later. Minako had finished making dinner, and he realized how hungry he was as he pushed himself to his feet. Makoto was quiet, but happy, and that quickly caught the eye of her mother.

"So. How was the rest of *your* day?"

Akihiko wanted to dive into a conversation about Akechi, but the blush on Makoto's face made him curious to know exactly *how* she had spent her day. The quick glance she gave him before turning away did nothing to help. Minako literally beamed at her, walked to stand in front of her, and held her shoulders with both of her hands.

"Well…?"

Makoto sighed, but the blush never faded. "I-I um…I h-had a lot of

fun…?”

While it was common for Makoto to be so nervous when she was hiding something, she seemed oddly *happy* about whatever it was. Minako laughed, her smile growing brighter.

“I’m sure you did.”

Makoto’s hands covered her face, and suddenly, Akihiko knew what this conversation was about. Why Minako wanted to leave. Why she was hounding Makoto for details. “M-Mom!”

It had to do with Amamiya. Makoto’s *boyfriend* . Had they spent that time together? Minako had commented that she really wished she could have done the same in high school…

He may have had no hard feelings against the boy, but he *really* didn’t want to hear any details about their time spent together. “You handled yourself well today.”

Makoto dropped her hands, and thankfully, the blush disappeared. Minako gave him a hard stare, but Makoto lowered her head shyly. “O-Oh. I-I thought I did terribly…”

Akihiko crossed his arms. “You could have done better, but you could have done much worse. To anyone who didn’t know you, I’m sure you acted like they expected. So don’t worry.”

“I guess I was thinking he was going to try and out us in front of the school.” She released a sigh. “But he knows about us. He has pictures of all of us entering the Metaverse. He named Sae as a target and he wants to come with us.”

The news came as a surprise. It was unexpected for *Akechi* to want to target Sae, and it was also terrifying to know that he *knew* she already had a palace. It couldn’t have been a coincidence. But the admission was also a blessing in disguise. It meant that Akechi would only go into the palace with Makoto and her team. He would be under surveillance. They didn’t have to worry about laying a trap and hoping he took the bait.

But that was assuming Akechi only ventured into Sae’s palace with

the team. Once he knew how to get in, there would be no way of knowing when he would go back *alone* .

It brought him to his next concern. “Has Akechi been physical with you before?”

Makoto tensed under his glare, and when she looked away, his heart stopped beating in his chest. “Um…”

“Makoto.”

Minako glanced back over at him, then back to their daughter. “Did he hurt you?”

“H-He…” Akihiko waited for what felt like hours for her to speak back up. “He tried to get under my skin. I felt trapped, so I may have gotten physical with him.”

He breathed a sigh of relief. “What did he say to you to make you feel trapped?”

Her eyes lowered to the floor and he worried he wasn’t going to get a straight answer. “He…he told me he knew about you being my dad, and you being my mom.” Again, it wasn’t a surprise, but it was probably the first time Akechi had been so forward with Makoto. “And he knew about me…being a Phantom Thief.”

One of the hard parts about detective work was intimidating the *right* people. Criminals would crack under constant pressure. Innocent people would crack too, but for the wrong reasons. He assumed that was how Sae managed to have the track record she had earned in her career, by baseless threats on terrified civilians. And knowing Makoto and her inability to lie, Akechi went straight for the throat.

“I’m sorry.”

Akihiko took a step forward when Makoto dropped her head to her chest. “Why are you sorry?”

“Because I assaulted him.”

Minako shot a look to him, but he only smiled. “Makoto, if you feel

threatened, then I want you to feel strong enough to fight your way out, physically or not. And I told you to be careful around him, so your instincts were right to fight back."

"How does he know for a fact we're your parents?" Minako looked so confused. Then, like a bolt of lightning, she froze. "I-Is this…is this because I spoke to him that day when I was looking for Sae?"

Makoto kept her eyes on the floor. "He mentioned that he had met you, and that our eyes were a dead giveaway."

Akihiko stood behind Minako and dropped a hand to her shoulder. "It's alright. Him knowing our family secrets doesn't mean that's a bad thing. We can use it to our advantage, especially if he's already planning on going to Sae's palace."

"He's going to kill her!"

He noticed the way Makoto's hands clenched at her side. Her outburst struck a chord in him, so he reached out with his free hand to grab Makoto's wrist. "Makoto. Nothing is going to happen to Sae. I promise. I will do all I can to keep her safe. Because I can count on you to help me."

Makoto lifted her head slowly, her eyes glazed over with tears, and stared back at him, surprised. He gave her a small smile to reassure her, but then her tears streamed down her face and she wrapped both of her arms around him.

"Thank you, Dad." She squeezed him, keeping her face pressed into his chest. Minako gave him a warm smile and draped her arms over the both of them. No one said anything for the longest time until Makoto finally pulled away from him.

"I won't let you down. I promise. Akechi will not get to me, to either of you, or Sis. We will stop him."

His hand fell back to her shoulder, and he could sense the determination in her words. Together, he knew everything would be okay.

Chapter 133

Chapter 133

Be careful around Akechi.

Sae wanted to scoff at the simple message. It brought back her previous anger, but also reminded her that Akechi *was* acting suspiciously and she had to keep her eye on him. She just didn't need Akihiko to tell her that.

It had been a long few days. She was told by a coworker that there had been a lead developing in the Phantom Thief case. Yet no one would say anything more. It was technically *her case* to work on, so the fact she had to hear about a lead through the grapevine annoyed her. Akechi had said something about bringing her their leader, but how the hell would he do that when they didn't know where to start looking?

Akechi did tell her he was going to Shujin for their culture festival, but Sae also knew he was going because the students wanted him to. She almost followed up about it with Makoto, but there had been some distance between the two of them for weeks now. An ever reminder that she didn't need any one of her family members. That Makoto made it very clear to her where she stood, and she would fight back against Sae if she chose to challenge her.

Shujin was an excellent place to start. It would have been even better if her own sister wasn't the student council president. Makoto, if involved, would deny and hide the truth just like their father had. Perhaps a little prying would make her open up, or at least clue her in on a supposed *lead* , or if she had been wasting her time.

But she knew the second she pulled Makoto aside to talk to her, Akihiko would make a scene and snap at her for even thinking of speaking to her sister.

And there was the rage again.

“I think he’s behind your mental shutdowns.”

She *had* to get more information out of Akihiko. There was no other way around it. His attack on his boss was likely fabricated, so at least he was being honest about *one* thing. If she couldn’t get him to name these Phantom Thieves so she could succeed in the case of the century, then she could at least use his information to figure them out herself.

It took her a full day and half of her pride to reply to his message from the night before. *I need to talk to you.*

It was a long shot, and this time, she would be more prepared. If she had the chance to talk on *her* terms, she would have control of the situation. Plus, if he denied her the opportunity, then she would use that against him. Didn’t he tell her last time that if she wanted to talk, all she had to do was ask?

She was asking alright, but for more selfish reasons.

Where at?

For someone who desperately wanted to return to her life, Akihiko sure stayed on point. Granted he wasn’t a texting person, and she would *never* call him, but he could have been more elaborate or *excited* in his response.

She knew better than to stay in Kasumigaseki, or head west to Leblanc, so she cut her losses and told him she would meet him in Ebisu. It was out of her way from where she lived, but if the wrong eyes saw her there, she had a ready excuse. Another case she had been working on closing about one of Kaneshiro’s henchmen had been living in the area.

Sounds like your father was right to be so worried about you.

Sae shook her head. One criminal wasn’t enough to justify why Akihiko forced her to walk the path of life she had to take.

He could have been killed that day. You could be working his case right now without any sense of being wrapped in a conspiracy.

Why were her thoughts running so rampant today?

Sadly, she was starting to understand Akihiko's reasoning more as time went on. From Kaneshiro, to Akechi, to god knows how many other people tried to kill him, if any one of them had known about her or Makoto, they would be dead. Kabukicho would still be a mess and a hotspot for yakuza and sex trafficking. Akechi would still be flying under her radar if she had lived to see herself grow up the same way. Whoever this Shido person was would never have been cast in doubt…

There was no way in hell she was going to stop and admit to Akihiko that she could see why he chose to do what he did. Because in the end, he made an exception for Makoto. He would never have shown up on a whim to save her, taken her out to the gym to train with her, treated her to an evening out because she was doing so well in school.

The fact of the matter was that Makoto was his priority. Sae was second at best. But no matter how many times she told her mother about her feelings, the *neglect* , the disappointment, she continued to stand by him. She even told her to stop getting so *angry* .

Focus.

Sae closed her laptop and decided to head out a few minutes early. Akechi had been at school, so it would be the perfect time to do some digging about him once she returned. Assuming, of course, Akihiko didn't send her over the edge. She wanted the meeting to be brief with her controlling the questions. She would make that very clear to him when she saw him.

He wanted time with her, and she was going to give it to him. So long as she also got what she wanted.

When she made her transfer to head south to Ebisu, she suddenly got cold feet. What was she thinking? This man spent half of his life turning people into a flustered mess so they would speak the truth. It was an art that sadly, she didn't possess. She had to resort to fear and intimidation to pull half-truths (and maybe forced lies) from her witnesses. Akihiko was well liked and respected, something she was

not, and she knew a third attempt to arrest him for hindering prosecution would only backfire in her face.

But she powered on through. Mostly because she would look like an idiot if she returned to her office after telling the secretary that she would be gone for a few hours. She would at least learn something from Akihiko. Whether that was more about Akechi, more about this mysterious power of his, how he knew Isshiki…

One of the things she never told anyone was that while she hated her childhood, she loved her childhood home. Ebisu was quiet. Mature. A nice breath of fresh air before one had to step into the station and head north to Tokyo. Everyone was well mannered and polite. People would sit on benches and rest from their ridiculously busy day in the city. There was some kind of air of peace, stability, comfort, that Sae missed greatly after she left.

True to his word, Akihiko was sitting a few blocks away behind the Garden Hall across the station. When he saw her approaching, he stood up, a smile widening on his face that made her wish she never asked to meet.

“Do you want to get some coffee?”

She would not lose control over this meeting already. In response, she shook her head and dropped herself onto the bench he had previously been occupying. “I want some answers.”

“I have these.”

He held out a small bag, but Sae wasn’t going to take it. He wasn’t going to be able to butter her up and walk away without the truth for a *second* time.

“I bought them for you. You can take them with you, if you want.”

Finally, she sighed and swiped the bag from his hand. With a smile on his face, Akihiko came to sit at her side. She refused to look in the bag and see what exactly he had bought for her. Either way, she would throw it in the first trash can she saw on her way back to the office.

Crossing her arms over her chest, she tried to take over the conversation. “I want to know more about this supposed power you have.” She shot him a look. “I’m giving you this chance to be honest with me. If you lie to me or try and make this about you, then I will walk away. Do you understand?”

Slowly, he nodded to her, then copied her posture and leaned back against the bench. “Yeah. I get it.”

Good. “Then please, I’m all ears.”

His sigh meant he was nervous, or wishing he wouldn’t have shown up either. It made her feel powerful. “When I was younger, Mitsuru asked me if I wanted to use my strength to do some good in the world. I didn’t really care, but she told me that I could become stronger if I joined her. So I did. She handed me a replica gun and told me how the power worked. I would shoot myself in the head, proving my resolve, and then a guardian spirit would show up.”

Sae stared at her hands, baffled and speechless. Was he serious? What kind of messed up childhood did *he* have where he honestly thought she would believe him?

“It’s called a persona. Mine used electric based attacks, but each one is different. We would fight in this twisted version of our world against beings called shadows. Every full moon, there was a big one that threatened to do serious damage, so we all trained in a distorted version of our high school to be ready to face it. And I know I’m not the expert, but we believe a similar situation is happening now.”

It took her a solid minute to be able to speak. “W-What are you talking about?”

“It’s how I heard about Isshiki.”

That was something she could understand. “So you do know her.”

Akihiko shook his head. “Not personally, no. Mitsuru’s family is known for their dealings with shadows and supernatural occurrences, so Isshiki’s name came up once before this giant

mess. After some investigation, I know that she was someone who suffered a mental shutdown. Probably to silence her since she knew what was happening."

She couldn't lose sight of her main goal. If she understood the other world, she could find out who the Phantom Thieves were. She had to keep him talking. "You sound so sure."

He shrugged. "Well, when it all makes sense in your head and then your main suspect admits to it all, yeah, I'm sure."

She had more questions than answers. Again. "And your main suspect is…?"

"I don't want you to get involved," he told her with a serious tone to his voice. "I will handle this. All I want you to do is be careful around Akechi. The rest of it will work itself out."

It took a lot of strength not to slap him. "Nothing you've told me makes any sense. I want to know how these Phantom Thieves work so I can prosecute them. Tell me how they tie in with the mental shutdowns and I'll keep your name out of the case files."

Akihiko dared to chuckle at her. "That's a nice offer, but I'm afraid I don't know too much about it myself. Sure I know who they are, but how they do their work, I have no idea."

Her fists tightened at her side. "Then why bring up your powers at all? Why tell me your experiences might have a link to Isshiki? How are you absolutely certain that Akechi is the one I need to be wary about and not *you?"*

"Do you trust me?"

The answer was a simple *no* , especially because he was hiding so much more than he was willing to talk about. But at the same time, she had no evidence to prove him wrong. He had been truthful about his boss. He had yet to lie to her about anything, really. His story was abstract, but so were the cases that remained unsolved sitting on her desk. There were too many commonalities that she couldn't overlook anymore.

Akihiko and Akechi knowing about Isshiki and what ties she may have had to the mental shutdown cases…

And who was she going to side with first?

“I will trust you this once. But if I find out you’re lying to me, you will regret it.”

His smile annoyed her immensely. “Then trust me when I tell you that the Phantom Thieves have nothing to do with your mental shutdowns. Focus your time on Akechi. Look into his past. He lost his mother. He had no father. And he’s recently led me to believe that there’s bad blood between him and his dad. Just like you and me.”

Suddenly, a recent conversation with Akechi popped up in her mind. It was from the same day that Akihiko found her trying to catch whoever had been following her…

“No one should be allowed to use their children as an excuse to do whatever they want.”

Akechi had been so *angry* when he had said it. Almost like his parents had used him.

“Something wrong?”

Was that truly why Akechi wanted to take down Akihiko? Because he was a father that abandoned his children? When she felt a pressure on her arm, Sae shot her head back up, then took a deep breath.

“I-I don’t know.”

Akihiko’s hand gripped her arm tighter. “Talk to me.”

It was hard coming clean to a man she had sworn she would never come clean to. But she had sensed it then, Akechi’s dark side, and she could very well be in serious danger. And if she was in danger, Makoto would have been in just as much trouble.

“He told me once that he hated his family. He hated them enough to

kill. But when it came to seeking some sort of revenge, he thought it was best done slowly. Like he's thinking about going after his parents or something…"

His mother was already dead, so that just left his father. Or a sibling she didn't know about.

Akihiko seemed to think much the same. "We can't find anything about his father. He wasn't mentioned on the birth certificate. He wasn't listed on any database."

"Having a child outside the bounds of marriage is frowned upon." She grabbed her chin, withdrawing into herself like she usually did when she was alone at the office. "Perhaps the father didn't want an affair made public."

It would have made more sense if Akechi's mother would have been killed before or shortly after he was born. But why wait so many years after his birth to commit a murder? Was it a suicide? Did his mother keep hoping that the father would leave a wife or a promising job to take care of them, then tell the father she would go to the press if he didn't?

"Then how does Akechi know who his father is?"

Maybe he didn't. Maybe his anger was aimed at all fathers who disowned their children. Maybe Akihiko was more of a target because he too tried to cover his tracks, just like Akechi's father…

"Sae."

She snapped out of her thoughts and turned to Akihiko, who was grinning beside her. She realized she had spaced out for a good minute or two, and had been caught by someone who found it entertaining. Another urge to slap him came and went, but she did at least push herself up to her feet. She hadn't learned much, but if she could learn more about Akechi, she could decide for herself if he was the criminal behind the mental shutdowns or not. If she learned who his father really was, maybe that would also help her understand his anger and rage. She was sure that the rest of the puzzle would fit together in the process.

Akihiko stopped her before she walked away. “Don’t overwork yourself. Forget what I said earlier. Let me look into Akechi and his parents. If he were to catch you, I don’t want you to get in trouble.”

She chuckled at his concern. “It’s cute that you’re so worried about me.”

“I am.” He pushed himself up to his feet as well. “You don’t understand, Sae. Akechi and those above him are not to be taken lightly. I already have one foot in the grave. You still have so much of your life left to live. If anyone is going to make a stand on any of these guys and take the heat, I want it to be me.”

Sae wanted to roll her eyes, or say something smart back to him. But he grabbed her arm and turned her to face him. The seriousness on his face caught her off guard. “I mean it. Please don’t get yourself in any trouble over this.”

She pulled her arm free. “Then why bother talking to me at all?”

A sad smile showed on his face. “You’re my daughter. And it’s my job to make sure you’re okay.” He held up a hand to silence her remark. “But I also want you to be aware of the danger that surrounds you. And I hope any time you feel threatened, you don’t hesitate to let me know.”

It took more strength than she thought it would to nod her head, then turn and walk away before she trapped herself with words. The train ride back to the office was rowdy, but uneventful. She was off in her own mind regardless. She didn’t like how she was feeling. It had been happening more often than not recently. Ever since her mother slapped handcuffs on her and forced her to meet with Akihiko, she hadn’t been the same.

Granted his accusations were powerful, he was also stepping into her comfort zone that she had spent *years* trying to keep him out of. Why all of the sudden was he turning his attention back to her? Had Makoto been staying out of trouble enough that he needed to focus his worry on someone else? Or had Makoto grown up to the point she told him she didn’t need his attention, and thought Sae would make a better replacement?

Makoto is your sister…

When she stepped off the train at Kasumigaseki, she realized she was still carrying the small bag Akihiko had given her when they met. She had meant to throw it away, but her curiosity got the best of her. Once she was outside the station, she looked around the area for signs of someone watching her. It was a paranoid thought, which made her shake her head and reach into the bag anyway.

Inside were two curry buns, her favorite quick snack when she had been younger. Her mother had tried making them for her when she was still living at home, and Akihiko would often buy them because she had always failed. She loved them now more than ever. They were quick to eat, cheap, and gave her the strength to carry out her day. How Akihiko would remember something so *insignificant* was beyond her.

It was, however, a pleasant surprise. And she did *not* throw them away. She did wait until she was in the safety of her own office, door closed and blinds down, before she pulled one out from the bag.

She also refused to thank him.

And just like so many other times before, she was rejuvenated. She flipped open her laptop and got right to work. She finished some small-time cases by wrapping up paperwork. She made a few calls to officers with cases in progress to finalize them for court. She ignored a text from her mother, thanking her for going and speaking to her father. It annoyed her because she hadn't gone to make *him* feel better. She went to speak to him because *she* needed his information.

At one point, a few hours later, Sae was tempted to break that silent oath with Akihiko and look into Akechi on her own. She knew Akihiko had powerful friends, Mitsuru being one of the best, and he could likely find more in ten seconds than she would find in ten hours. She just really, *really* didn't want to speak to him just to find out if Akechi was actually a threat or not.

Hell. Maybe if she came out and asked Akechi about his father, he might tell her who he was. However, if he truly was dangerous, she

didn't want to tip him off.

A few minutes went by, but then there was a knock on her door. Sae wasn't informed of a scheduled meeting, or that anyone had wanted to see her, so she braced herself to deal with Akechi.

The man who walked through the door was not Akechi, nor was it someone she recognized right away. She was up on her feet quickly, confused as to why this man was looking for her, or if he had mistaken her office, or how he had gotten past the secretary without her relaying a message that someone was stopping by.

He smiled at her, but there was something *off* about him. He dressed nice. He had good posture. But he looked around her office like he was looking for something. Like he owned the place. It bothered her. "Can I help you?"

"Forgive me," he said, his voice stern and confident. She couldn't put a name to his face. The way he carried himself made her think he was important… "I've heard wonderful things about you, so I just had to stop by."

He was still walking around her office, stopping at some of the certificates she had mounted on the wall. It would have been rude for her to kick him out, but he was making her extremely uncomfortable. She repeated her earlier question. "Can I help you?"

His chuckle sounded dark and ominous. A criminal laugh. "It's nice to meet you, Sae Niijima."

His eyes met hers and she felt trapped in her own office. "And you are?"

"Odd that you don't know me, but I guess I don't make appearances like this very often." The unknown man held out his hand, but Sae was hesitant about shaking it. "Masayoshi Shido."

The walls around her started to collapse. This was the same man Akihiko had been intimidated by. And if he could strike fear into a man that was *never* afraid, then Sae had to tread lightly. To seem more polite and at ease, she reached out and shook his hand, but

did not say much else. Shido pushed her buttons a little more when he sat himself down in a seat across from her desk.

“I know you’re a woman of honorable merits, so I won’t be wasting your time. I’ve come here to see how you would feel about taking a position as managing partner of my law firm. This is not a position I wish to fill in haste, but I feel you are the perfect person for the job.”

Sae dropped into her own seat. Becoming a managing partner was not a goal she had in mind, but it was a *huge* promotion for someone her age. Not only would it come with a significant increase in pay, it would come with power. She would have the authority to arrest *anyone* without any questions asked. She would be allowed to *win* , no matter the consequences. No matter the *truth.* No matter what was buried in the *lies.*

She could arrest her entire family and Mitsuru wouldn’t be able to save them.

She could arrest Amamiya and anyone he associated with just because she thought they knew something about Kamoshida and Kaneshiro, Phantom Thief targets.

She often struck fear into people just with a look, but she often lacked the power to make the arrest official. With this opportunity, she could crush people in the palm of her hand.

It was an impressive offer. One she would have jumped at the chance to have a few weeks ago.

But now…

“It’s something to think over, Niijima-san.” Shido stood up and offered her a smile she knew was fake. “Please consider the offer. You’re my first choice of a select few, and I know you will do the best job. I hope you know that when I become Prime Minister, anything you want will be yours to have. I can assure you of that.”

Sae leaned into a hand propped up on her desk. “This is…quite the honor.”

Was it? She had worked hard. It was nice to be validated. But it also

seemed so fake. Like Shido was only offering her the position to keep her under surveillance and away from Akihiko and *the truth.*

“Perhaps a little incentive is needed.” He gave her another disturbing smile, then shattered her whole world. “I know who the Phantom Thieves are. And with your help, we can take them down and restore peace to our great nation. Together.”

He handed her a slip of paper, a document she recognized immediately. A search warrant. For two areas. One for Shujin Academy, and one for Sakura-san’s home.

“I want you to lead the task force. With this victory, you’ll have earned your new position.”

Her vision started to grow hazy, but she reached out and took the papers from his hand. It was hard to believe that this moment was happening. Whether or not it was real, or legitimate, she could worry about later. She needed her space again. She had to *think* . So, she nodded her head, and somehow managed to push herself back to her feet.

“I will need some time. This is all too surreal.”

Another smile. Another chuckle. “Just remember that you’re a powerful woman who should have been respected for years. If you ever need anything, or assistance in any way, please let me know. I will show you that no one crosses those who work hard for me.”

In an odd move, he bowed to her, then turned to walk out the door. Sae exhaled deeply, her knees giving out and she thankfully fell back into her chair. She couldn’t honestly trust Shido. She *wanted* that position. She *wanted* the power.

But at what cost?

Maybe she was realizing a little too late the web she had been snared in.

Chapter 134

Chapter 134

Akihiko had stormed out of the apartment before Minako had a chance to stop him.

They had been sitting at the dinner table with Makoto, who had been oddly quiet that night. Eventually, Akihiko had gotten her to open up with them, and she had basically said she was nervous about taking Akechi to her sister's palace the following night. Minako had reached across the table and took her daughter's hand, reminding her that her friends were working on a plot to trap Akechi, and no harm would come to anyone.

According to Akihiko, Fuuka had been one step ahead of them. Fuuka was working on an application to install on Akechi's phone to track his movements, his phone calls, his texts, online chats and searches, pretty much everything. If the app was successfully downloaded onto Akechi's phone, then he was as good as done. After all, what teenager didn't live and die by their phone these days?

But as soon as Akihiko's own phone went off and the message was read, he bolted out the front door without so much as a word. Makoto looked over at her, but Minako was quick to her feet and gave one last look to her daughter.

"Stay here. I will send you a text when I know what's going on, okay?"

Her promise did little to calm Makoto, but at least she stayed in the apartment. Minako had no idea where Akihiko would have gone, and how he managed to leave so *quickly* , but if she had to wager a guess, it had something to do with Sae. Akihiko only moved so fast, injured or not, without saying anything, when it had to do with his children.

Lady Luck was on her side, as she caught him on the platform after

missing a train out of Ebisu. Minako grabbed his arm, but the look of terror on his face made her heart leap into her throat.

Akihiko, thankfully, didn't leave her wondering. "Shido is with Sae right now. And I don't have a *damn* way to get there faster!"

She did all she could to calm him down, grabbed his hand, and forced her to look at him. "Aki, Sae can take care of herself. I know you're worried, but she's going to be okay."

"He's going to hurt her!" He turned his body and slammed his fist into a nearby wall. "Mitsuru told Aigis not to do a damn thing!"

"Because she trusts her," she said quietly, hoping that he had heard her. "Sae came to talk to you today because she knows something is going on. Trust her. He's not going to hurt her. Maybe try and sway her, but she knows better."

He leaned into the arm he had against the wall, then sighed heavily after several seconds. She allowed him another few minutes to calm down, then tugged on his hand to grab his attention again.

"Trust her."

He took a few more deep breaths, then dropped his arm and turned to her. "I still want to check up on her." He walked to take his place in the line for the incoming train, determined to follow through on his words. "I have to know why he is there."

Minako knew better than to try and stop him, so she didn't. All she could do was follow behind him, grab his hand when he was walking *too* fast, and offer him silent support when they stepped aside to let passengers on or off. One hand remained either gripped in his, or close enough so that she could reach out to him quickly. The other held her phone, trying to type out a message to Makoto that they were going to check up on Sae.

Several stops later, Akihiko took off out of the train almost as fast as he had stormed out of the apartment. Minako considered herself lucky that he was relatively easy to keep her eyes on from a distance. He also came to his senses after he had reached the last

of the stairs and waited for her to catch up to him.

She didn't want to admit it to him, but she was worn out. The anxiety mixed with the hustle and stair climbing wasn't something she was used to anymore. He must have noticed her uneven breaths, because he reached for her hand with a smile.

"Someone out of shape?"

If they were back home, or in a more secluded area, she would have slapped him. But, it was nice to see that he was in better shape than she was, given his recent injuries. "Maybe someone should keep me more active."

He rolled his eyes, but Minako could see the hint of red darkening his cheeks. "Let's go."

Minako hadn't been to Kasumigaseki in months, since she had visited Sae and told her story to Akechi. It was a professional district, most people being cops, lawyers, or politicians. She grew worried that someone would see her with Akihiko, someone who wasn't *good,* so she tried to keep her distance.

However, Akihiko slowed his pace to keep her walking at his side. "Don't worry, Minako. I'd rather have you next to me than behind me right now."

"A-Are you just going to storm into her office?"

Minako hoped to the gods that this Shido guy was long gone. If she saw him, there would be so much hell to pay. She might even kill him. Akihiko would never let her, but that wouldn't stop her mind from imagining it.

They did the next best thing and met up with Aigis. Minako threw her arms around her like she always did when she was younger, but Akihiko was quick to ask what had happened.

Still in her arms, Aigis replied, "I saw an unknown man enter the building. Then, I followed him around until it was discovered he was seeking your daughter."

“Do you know why?”

Akihiko was nervous, never standing still for a second. Minako released Aigis and grabbed his hand, hoping to calm him down.

Aigis shook her head sadly. “I do not. However, he left minutes ago. I confirmed that Sae-san is safe.”

She released a breath and nearly toppled into Akihiko. Sae was safe. That was all that mattered. Plus, this bad guy had left before they had arrived. Meaning Minako wouldn’t have to head to jail any time soon.

Akihiko appeared to be grateful, too. “Thank you, Aigis.” He then turned to her. “I know you wanted to meet him personally. So I’m thankful he’s long gone before you made a scene.”

She scoffed at him and threw a hand to her hip. “I’m not the one who stormed out half an hour ago without a word.”

“Right.” Akihiko looked around the area, as if trying to find a place to wait for Sae without drawing too much more unwanted attention. Minako really wanted to ask Aigis how she went about keeping tabs on Sae without getting caught, but Akihiko pulled on her wrist before she got the chance.

“I will keep doing my duty, Minako-san, Sanada-san!”

Akihiko thanked her one last time, then walked towards the intersection ahead of them. When they were safe enough, she asked the question she wanted to ask Aigis. “How does she keep an eye on Sae from across the street?”

Sadly for her, he shrugged his shoulders. “I have no idea. Fuuka and Mitsuru had said something about some upgrades and the security cameras, but that’s about where they lost me. I trust them, and I trust her. That’s good enough for me.”

It wasn’t really good enough of an explanation, but Aigis did make contact with them about a dangerous encounter and they had responded accordingly. That had to mean something. But if Sae was in serious danger, would Aigis have interfered? And if she did, would

she have done so safely?

She would have hated to arrive at the courthouse, half the wall missing, and Sae terrified for her life with a stranger that fired missiles out of her hands. She also didn't want Aigis to go to jail either…

"We have to wait for Sae somewhere out of sight. If she knows we're here, she'll get angry."

Minako wanted to take him down to the little coffee shop on the corner that she used to meet Sae at. Even though she knew Sae wouldn't walk by just to think about the better times, maybe she still chose to frequent the shop. That and she could pick up something for dessert that she missed out on because of this little venture. And she knew Makoto would dip into her stash again if she wasn't there to stop her.

But, they didn't have to go too far before Akihiko put a hand on her arm. Minako looked around, hoping to catch a glimpse of someone she could beat up (she had a lot of pent up aggression at the moment). Instead, Akihiko left her standing on the middle of the sidewalk as he walked up to someone else.

She naturally followed behind him and learned he had spotted Sae a good distance away. Maybe she was getting old. Akihiko couldn't have better vision than *her* .

"Are you okay?"

Sae was surprised to see him, but that quickly faded into annoyance when her eyes met hers. Sae returned her attention to Akihiko, but she was far from happy or relieved to see them.

"Is there a reason I wouldn't be?"

"Shido was seen with you. Did he hurt you, or intimidate you?"

It was rare to see Akihiko so nervous and afraid, but he spoke almost too fast and it was a miracle Sae knew what he had said. However, all she did was pull her bag higher up on her shoulder and stare back at him angrily.

“How would you know he was here? And why would you assume he was here to hurt me?”

Minako had to reach out and grab Akihiko’s hand when he made a move to step closer to Sae. He was in a panic, and he tended to get physical when he was like this. He looked over his shoulder at her when she pulled him back, but his eyes didn’t stay on her for long. He at least didn’t try and step out of her hold.

“What did he say to you then?”

When Sae cracked a smile, followed by a dark chuckle, Minako felt her heart come to a stop. “He offered me a new job.”

Either Akihiko was taken back by her admission or he had sensed the abrupt change in Sae. “N-New job?”

“He personally came to ask me to work as an attorney for him. Better pay. Better benefits. Better hours. And best of all, *respect* and *power.* ” Sae’s eyes narrowed at them, but that smile widened on her face. “I can have you arrested with a snap of my fingers. I can bring in every single one of those students at Shujin and throw them behind bars until they start to talk. Why wouldn’t I join his side?”

Akihiko yanked his arm out from her grasp and stood directly in front of Sae. Minako was much slower to do the same, trapped in her own mind for a few seconds. Akihiko had come home that afternoon in such high spirits. He had told her that Sae was being open with him, and that little by little, she was coming around.

Yet here she was, no longer her little girl, but a depraved shadow of jealousy, rage, and unfounded pride. It broke her heart. At the same time, she was glad she asked Makoto and her friends to do their work on Sae instead of riding this damn roller coaster for however many more months before she snapped.

“He’s *using* you to get to *me!”* Akihiko’s voice was growing louder, something she didn’t think he realized, and there were quite a few people around. “He doesn’t give a damn about *you!”*

“And *you* never gave a damn about *me!”* Sae literally pushed

Akihiko back, then Minako came to stand between the two of them.

“Stop it.” She wished she sounded half as strong as she wanted to be. “Sae, this man is dangerous. You should know that.”

But her daughter continued to laugh and smile like there wasn’t a care in the world. “He’s signed search warrants for Shujin and Sakura’s residence. All I have to do now is put them into use, and everything you’ve been hiding from me will be known.”

“You’ve lost your damn mind.”

“Oh, don’t worry.” Minako didn’t know how much more of this back and forth she could take. “I’ll be asking him for a warrant for your residence as well. I’m sure he’d be more than happy to throw you behind bars for the rest of your life.”

Finally, she took that step forward and narrowed her eyes at Sae. “You can’t be serious.”

Sae crossed her arms with an angry huff. “You have a month. You can either come forward with your information, or I’ll find it myself when I have my search teams tear your place to pieces.” Then, her eyes looked over her shoulder to Akihiko standing behind her. “I highly suggest you warn Makoto as well. I will show no mercy to anyone who has crossed me, including her.”

It was hard to hear, even harder to comprehend Sae’s wrath, but she had to focus on keeping Akihiko contained. It was a threat against Makoto, something he sure as hell wasn’t going to let slide. So she turned to put her hands on his chest, then gave Sae the darkest look she could offer.

“And I highly suggest you brace yourself for defeat. You have nothing against anyone, and this is a coward’s way of getting what they want.”

Minako expected that to be the end of the conversation and Sae would huff and walk away. But she didn’t. Instead, she pointed a finger in her face, her scowl rivalling her own. It almost felt like she was looking in a mirror.

“You can stand against me all you want, but don’t you *ever* act like you care. You took in a *criminal* before you even thought about me, once again reiterating that you *never* cared, you never *will* care, and my hatred is justified!”

Sae was furious, but her accusation tore right through Akihiko. Minako could tell from the way he flinched back, like she had struck him. And she sure as hell wasn’t about to lose him *again* because her daughter was trying to break him down purposely.

It was just harder to find her voice than she thought it would be. “I told you, Sae, we *tried* . But you resisted. You have no right to use this-,”

“I’m sorry, Sae.” Akihiko stepped around Minako with the heartbreaking look that she imagined him having. Tears began lining her eyes when she watched Akihiko bravely wrap both of his arms around their daughter. Sae’s eyes widened in shock, but for that precious second, she said nothing, didn’t pull away, and the sight was too much for Minako to handle.

Akihiko loved Sae. Even when she hated him. Even when he spent all those nights tormented by her rage. Even after the hell she had put him through that year. All Minako wanted, more than anything, was for the two of them to put the past behind them and move on. And she thought they were so close, so damn *close…*

But it was out of their hands now. And Akihiko likely saw that. The only reason he hugged Sae was because he knew he was never going to get that chance again. Not unless Makoto and her friends worked a miracle that she hadn’t been able to make herself.

With blurred vision, Minako watched painfully as Akihiko released Sae (odd it wasn’t the other way around), and stepped away from her. “No matter what I do, or what I say, I know I deserve your anger.”

She was about to grab his arm and tell him to *stop,* then he lifted his head and narrowed his eyes at Sae. “But I’m tired, Sae. I’m tired of watching your mother and your sister slip away from me because of you. I will always love you. I would do anything I could to protect you

if you needed it. But I will not keep allowing you to destroy someone else's happiness when they don't deserve it."

It took Sae a second or two to snap out of her surprise, but then the glare was back in her eyes. "Spare me the sentiment. I've never needed you, *either* of you, and I'll see all three of you behind bars in a month. That's the only happiness I'll *ever* need."

With that, Sae gave them one last sneer, then turned on her heels and walked off. Next to her, Akihiko breathed a heavy sigh, his head dropping to his chest in sorrow. Minako quickly reached for his hand, holding it tightly between both of hers, uncaring if he noticed the stray tears on her cheeks.

"We've done all we can, Aki." Her voice cracked when he turned his eyes to her. "All we can do now is put our faith in Makoto and her friends. They'll bring Sae back to us…I-I know it…"

His arm wrapped around her shoulder before she even knew she was crying. For so many years, she stood against Akihiko when it came to their daughter. Yet here she was, realizing how much pain she had put him in, how much he truly wanted to reach out to Sae, how much he *loved* her, but Minako remained blind to it all. Sae didn't deserve the childhood she had been given, but neither did Makoto, and she chose to make the best of it. She chose to love and find happiness in the situation.

It had never been Akihiko's fault. It had been Sae's.

And it just now hit her that she had been standing on the wrong side for far too long.

"They will," he whispered to her, her hair muffling his voice. "Because we're going to help them, too. After all, a good parent will do everything they can, even if it's not easy, to help…"

She leaned more into him to cover up her sobs. He, in return, held onto her tighter. It was going to be the hardest thing she would ever do, but she loved Sae, too. It would all be worth it in the end. Because they *were* going to save her. She would be able to see Akihiko and Sae happy again, *together* , a moment she had been

dreaming of ever since Sae was a carefree toddler and rough housing with her father…

Patience. It would happen. She just had to wait.

“We should head home,” she said weakly, pulling away just as weak. “I don’t want Makoto to worry any more than she already has.”

Akihiko simply nodded against her in response. Minako at least reached for his hand as the two of them began making their way back home. While they were waiting at the station, she pulled out her phone to send a quick text to Makoto that they were coming back. It served as a good enough distraction so she wouldn’t comment on how *devastated* Akihiko appeared to be.

But it finally gnawed on her too much, and as soon as they stepped off the train in Ebisu, she tugged on his hand to force him to look at her. “I know you’re upset, but I just want you to know that I’m proud of you, standing up to Sae. She had no right to keep dragging you down…” She took a quick breath to compose herself, then added, “Just like I have had no right to hurt you for all those years I stood against you.”

Akihiko stared back at her in surprise and confusion. It was a much better look than his previous expression. “What?”

Minako wiped at her eyes with her free hand. “For so many years, I chose her over you. I understood her anger. I respected it. I *enabled* her to become who she is now, all while you suffered in silence. You keep your head up when you go out, when you face her, when you try and make amends through Makoto. And I’m sorry. I’m so sorry I’ve never tried to understand your pain until the moment you pulled Sae into your arms, knowing you would never get through to her on your own.”

She hated crying, in public no less, but she was overwhelmed with emotion. Akihiko didn’t give her a second to herself before he wrapped her in his arms and she cried into his chest. In the middle of the station platform, with people wandering around, with a daughter anxiously waiting for them to return home.

She didn't care. All she cared about was doing everything she could to make sure Akihiko finally got his happy ending.

"I've never blamed you for any of this, Minako." He held her tighter and rested his head against hers. "But I have hope now. I'll do everything I can to give you, Makoto, and Sae the happiness you deserve, too. So…" He held her at arms-length, but the smile on his face, while forced, made her feel like everything was going to work out in the end. "Keep your head up. And I'll keep my head up."

Minako wanted to throw herself back into his arms, but she chose instead to stand where she was and offer him a smile. Akihiko was the one to grab her hand again, gently pulling her out of the station and into the cooler night air. The chill helped spark her energy, her determination, and she was able to hold Akihiko's hand with equal strength the rest of the way back home.

Makoto jumped from the couch immediately, greeting them in a rush of concern and questions. "Is Sis okay? Are you guys okay? What happened?"

Minako had to put a hand on Makoto's shoulder to calm her down. "Your sister is fine."

Akihiko did not stay quiet like she expected. "Sae met with the same guy that kidnapped me. He is trying to use her and her hatred for me to break me down. And while Sae might be closing her eyes to the danger to see the benefits of working with him, she'll snap out of it soon."

He reached out and dropped a hand to Makoto's head. "Because we're going to save her. And with her help, we'll bring him down as a family."

Makoto's anxiety became a beaming smile, one full of life and eagerness to see that goal come to fruition. It warmed Minako's heart immensely.

Akihiko was correct. They were going to fight, and win, as a family.

Chapter 135

Chapter 135

She wasn't ready.

"Makoto?"

She wasn't. But she couldn't ask for another day to skip out on heading to Sae's palace without setting off alarm bells in Akechi.

"Makoto."

She snapped out of her thoughts, then glanced around the room. She was at home, in her living room, with her parents, Mitsuru, and Fuuka. Her friends were to infiltrate Sae's palace after school tomorrow. She didn't want to. She wasn't ready…

Her dad sighed, which made her realize how much of her anxiety was showing on the surface. "I know you're worried, and you don't know what will happen, but you won't be alone."

"If Sakura-chan can download our app on Akechi's phone, then we will be able to track him, even in the Metaverse." Fuuka smiled warmly at her. "Plus, with Sakura-chan's help, I'll be able to see what's going on through her eyes, too. We will all be with you to help!"

It was bad enough being lifted up by her friends, but now she felt worse for being so down that her parents' friends had to do extra work. "T-Thank you…"

Mitsuru crossed her arms. "We will keep up our investigation on our end. Being able to talk to Sakura-san will be a huge advantage to us. Being able to track Akechi even more so. But even if this plan fails, we have back-ups." Her eyes pierced through her soul. "This is not just your battle, Makoto. And we are not about to go down easily."

Her voice helped calm most of her worries. But truth be told, Makoto knew that she wouldn't sleep well for several nights, or even until Sae was safe and well.

"We have a month," her dad said with a sigh. "Then, Sae is going to use those search warrants to find the evidence she needs to arrest every single one of us."

Her mom slapped his arm. "Aki…"

While Makoto tensed at the harshness in his voice, she also appreciated his honesty. Not that she needed a reminder of how serious this mission was, but now they had a timeline. It would be just like every other palace before.

"We should let you get some rest." Mitsuru and Fuuka stood from their seats, the former giving her one last look. "I would advise you not to do too much tomorrow. Don't try and tackle everything all at once. Have faith in your friends, in us, and in yourself."

She nodded her head, but as soon as the two of them were out the door, Makoto dropped back into the couch behind her. She felt both her parents' eyes on her, but she couldn't think of anything to tell them. She had been to Sae's palace once, sure, but she went with her dad. Someone who knew what she was feeling. This time, she was going alone, with someone who might have been the guy with the black mask, and with a group of friends that had only recently learned the truth about her family.

"You have to do this, Makoto."

Her eyes shot up to meet her dad's, and she suddenly worried that he was disappointed in her. As quickly as she met his eyes, she dropped her head in shame. "I-I know…"

What if Akechi attacked Sae behind their back? What if Akechi was planning something, too? What if her friends saw how disturbed her sister was and no longer wanted to be her friend? What would Ren think of her? What if they failed and her parents fell apart…

"Makoto."

“Stop it, Aki.”

There were tears in her eyes before she could will them away. She did her best to hide them so her parents wouldn’t see them and think any less of her. But in the stiff silence, she had to lift a hand to her face as the tears fell from her eyes.

“Look at me, Makoto.”

It wasn’t easy forcing herself to look back at her dad, but she did. She thought he was annoyed with her, or upset that she was so nervous. But while he narrowed his eyes, there was a different emotion in them that she couldn’t name.

“I know you're scared, and I wish I could go with you. But I’ve watched you for weeks. I know what you’re capable of when you don’t think you can manage on your own. I know you’ll be fine, even if you don’t believe that yourself.”

Makoto felt a fresh wave of tears at her father’s praise. “Y-You really think that?”

The small smile he showed her gave her heart a start. “What was rule number one, Makoto?”

She felt her face warm under his gaze, but she answered quickly enough. “Don’t speak too much.”

There was a light laugh from him and she was suddenly much more comfortable. “Well, yes. I also told you that you had to stay next to me at all times. So while I may not be able to be with you physically, I want you to have this.”

He stood with relative ease, which made Makoto’s heart lighter, until he stopped in front of her. In his outstretched hand was a small box, and she slowly reached out to take it from him. Her fingers struggled to open the box, earning a small chuckle from her mom and her dad. A second or two later, with her face burning in embarrassment, she was able to remove the top and see what was inside.

It was a small pendant. Dark blue with a golden trim. She was immediately reminded of her police uniform, which bore the same

colors.

“Most cadets receive amulets or pendants when they graduate and become official officers.” Her dad sat in the space beside her. “It’s not quite the same, but I hope this will remind you that you’re not alone. That I’m proud of you, and that you’ve proven yourself to be a powerful ally.”

Makoto sat still, her eyes never leaving the pendant in her hand. It was the first time that night that her mind wasn’t racing, or doing anything at all really. When her dad reached over and took the case from her, she blinked and jerked in her spot. Again, he chuckled at her, then removed the necklace from its place.

“Do you want to wear it?”

She had to blink so many more times to clear her vision, to give her enough time to think of something to say. She even had to clear her throat for what felt like *hours* to overcome that lump that was nestled there. In the end, all she could do was nod once, but thankfully, her dad understood. He leaned over towards her, draping the pendant over her neck, and clasped the chain together before pulling away. Her hand quickly lifted to the added weight on her chest, lowering her eyes to reexamine the gift.

“I’m proud of you, Makoto. Don’t ever forget that.”

All of her emotions cracked at once. It was an honor to receive this kind of praise from a man she had loved all of her life. She never thought the day would come that she would step out of his shadow and into her own light willingly. She never thought she would *want* that day to come. She never wanted to fight without him.

But she had to. He couldn’t fight forever. And she finally had shown him that she was ready to face the world on her own. With or without him. Out of his shadows. But never without his love.

His hand on her shoulder was all it took for her tears to flow down her face and she buried herself in his chest. He held her loosely, but she did the opposite. She probably squeezed him too roughly, cried too much like a baby, but he didn’t seem to mind. So she unleashed

all of her emotions while he gave her the time to do so.

It only lasted a few minutes, thankfully, but then Makoto slowly pulled away, her head down so he didn't catch the remaining tears. She failed to have any words to speak to tell him what his gift had meant to her, but she knew he knew. Hopefully.

"And every successful mission starts with a good breakfast!"

His admission made her stumble for a second, but then she laughed. Her hand once again found the pendant on her chest, already seeking its comfort. "Y-Yes!"

Her mother, who had been quiet so far, came to stand next to where they were both sitting and placed her hand on her shoulder. "I know this is a lot for you to have to handle, but at the same time, we both know that we couldn't trust anyone else with our daughter but you. Thank you, Makoto."

She refused to spend her night crying again, so she tried to bury it behind a smile. "I wouldn't be able to do anything if it hadn't been for either of you." Her hand squeezed around her necklace. "Thank you, and I promise I will not let you down."

Her mom leaned down and hugged her tightly. "And I will make you a wonderfully healthy breakfast in the morning!"

True to her word, when Makoto woke up refreshed and confident, her mom had one of the biggest spreads for breakfast she had ever seen. Her dad even had a glow to his eyes seeing the array of food, but her mom was quick to stop him from touching anything.

"Makoto gets to make her plate first," she warned him with a glare. "Then we're going for a walk after breakfast. If you want to get back into shape, I need to train you."

Her dad rolled his eyes. "I'm pretty sure *I* trained *you* before you decided you didn't want to go running with me anymore."

"Eat up, Makoto." Makoto's smile stretched across her face. It had been a long time since her parents had been this happy, this motivated, this energetic. It literally took her breath away.

There was just one, giant void that was keeping her from being truly happy: her missing sister. But that was about to change. Once Makoto and her friends brought her back to her senses, her family would be complete and happy for the first time since she could remember.

Thanks to that thought and her mother's breakfast, Makoto had a bounce in her step the entire way to school. A few passing students waved at her, asked her why she seemed so happy, but she left them with a simple comment.

"Just trying to remain positive."

No one questioned her, nor did anyone try and bring her down. Some of them even told her that they felt so much better just because she *looked* so much better. The day seemed like it was going to go well, despite the afternoon she was about to have.

"Someone is in a great mood."

Of course Ren would try and find her after school let out. He probably assumed she would be trying to hide, since she had for a full day now, but she was ready. The weight around her neck reminded her that her dad was with her. She could do this. She refused to let him down.

"O-Oh." She just wished she could keep that level of confidence up when she spoke with Ren. But he made her mind turn to mush and her heart skip several beats. "Y-Yes. You could say that."

He eyed her curiously, but there was a cheesy grin on his face that brought a blush to hers. "New boyfriend?"

Makoto fell back on her feet at that. "W-What?"

"That necklace is pretty."

Her hand moved to the pendant, treasuring the cool plate against her fingers. "My dad gave this to me last night." She noticed how Ren's shoulders relaxed, and how his smile became more genuine. "He said that cops get these kinds of medallions after they graduate the academy. And he thinks I've earned it."

The smile grew across his face. “You must be very proud then.”

She nodded her head and wrapped her fingers around the pendant. “I am. But I also know that he’ll be with me when I feel like I’m trapped and have no one to turn to.”

Realizing what she had said in front of her boyfriend made her hold her hands up in a panic. “I-I’m sorry! I know I can count on you, too! I-It’s just that…f-for so long, I never saw myself as my own person because I wanted him to be there for me whenever I needed him. But he told me I don’t need him, because I’m strong enough on my own. So he gave me this to remind me of who I am, what he’s taught me, and I’m…happy…”

Ren stepped closer to her and grabbed one of her hands. “Just seeing the sparkle in your eyes makes me happy that you have this relationship with your dad. Because you’re truly beautiful right now, so I owe him a lot for blessing me with the sight.”

She let his compliment sink in, then she threw her free hand to her face to hide her blush. “W-Why are you like this?”

His arms wrapped around her back. “It’s fun.” His lips grazed the top of her head. “And you’re super cute when you get flustered.”

Makoto dropped her hand and glared at him, which only made Ren bite back a laugh. “One day, I’m going to even the playing field and never look back.”

Now *his* eyes sparkled with amusement. “Then I guess I should prepare my counterattack.”

Huffing loudly and dramatically, Makoto turned and began to walk away from him. He was quick to follow after her, but before she could reach the staircase to head out of school, he grabbed her hand and stopped her.

“But I hope you do know that you can depend on me.” His smile was weaker, his eyes more serious, but he was still leaving her speechless. “Your dad might not be able to come with us, but I’ll do everything I can to make sure nothing happens to you or your

sister."

Mentioning Sae made her take a slow inhale. She was ready. She was nervous, but she was ready. They would be meeting in a few minutes at the station. They would all go to the courthouse. They would all treat Akechi like a friend and not the enemy. They would all know the extent of her darkest family secrets…

A hand on her shoulder made her realize she had spaced out for too long. She turned back to Ren and did her best to put him at ease. "Sorry. I know what I need to do. But I'm still a little…worried…"

His fingers curled over her shoulder. "Don't be sorry. I can't imagine the heartache you're going through. So if things get to be too much, just let me know, okay?"

She didn't tell him that nothing would ever be too much, because she *had* to do this. She had to bring Sae back. Her parents couldn't do it by conventional means. It was now up to her to save her. If she failed, she would lose more than just her sister.

"Let's be off." It was better to just get it all over with. That first initial step was all she would need. She could read Akechi then, or better yet, have Futaba successfully do her magic so they could all keep tabs on the teen. She would know by the end of the day whether things would go well, or if they needed another plan of attack.

She just hoped Akechi didn't pick up on her nerves or she would be in trouble.

The Shujin group met at Aoyama-Itchome Station. They were to meet Futaba, Yusuke, and Akechi at the courthouse in Kasumigaseki. While it was better arrangements, since her group would have to make a transfer and the others would not, it was also better on her heart not having to deal with Akechi until everyone was together. Ann and Ryuji bickered back and forth over some random topic, which Ren threw himself into. Haru stood at her side, as if she knew exactly how she was feeling. Desperate to prove herself to her friends, but wanting her space at the same time.

"Pardon me for interrupting, but you seem so down, Mako-chan."

Makoto leaned back against the wall as they waited for the train. “I’m nervous, to be honest.”

Without her dad around, Haru was a close replacement. Haru had faced her own father. Blood. Someone she loved and respected and still had the courage to stand up to them. “I was nervous when facing my father, too. It was such a blessing to have met all of you and been able to rely on you for support.”

Haru was more positive than she was. On reflex, her hand shot to her throat. “Did it get easier for you, after the initial infiltration?”

Her friend smiled warmly at her. “I knew my father needed a change. That mentality is what pushed me forward. I think the hardest part for me was pacing myself, since nothing would change overnight. I just wish I could have been able to speak to him, even for a moment, after his change of heart.”

Makoto suddenly regretted bringing up the topic at all. “I-I’m sorry, Haru.”

She slapped her arm playfully. “Nonsense. I know we will find out who is behind all of this. But for now, I want you to know that it will be hard sometimes, but just like with me, you can rely on us, Mako-chan. If you ever need to get anything off your chest, please tell me.”

“If I lose my sister, I’ll lose everyone.” Her hand clenched the pendant. “My father will be heartbroken. My mother will lose herself trying to make him happy. I know everyone is expecting me to do this, but sometimes, it scares me.”

Haru put a comforting hand on her shoulder. “No one is expecting anything more from you than what you’ve done in the past. This is your sister, yes, but *you* are our friend. We will not let you down.”

She was tired of unleashing her worries on friends and family. She should be stronger by now. She shouldn’t be so nervous, or worried, or *weak* . She had her father’s strength, her mother’s hopes, and her friends’ companionship. But yet, she felt so *alone* .

“It will take some time,” Haru said quietly. “I know what you’re

feeling, that you have to be the one to take the responsibility solely on your shoulders. Perhaps once we spend a day or two in your sister's palace, you'll understand."

Makoto slowly nodded her head, then pushed herself off the wall to prepare to board the oncoming train. She had to do this. She would do this. Because if she didn't, Sae would disappear forever. It was her duty as her sister, as the daughter of strong parents, to bring Sae back to the family.

Back straight. Eyes up. Don't smile.

They all exited the train at Kasumigaseki Station, but Makoto was the one bringing up the rear. Her heart was racing too fast for her, and she felt dizzy as she walked to the stairs to leave the station. But she had to push on. She had been to the palace once before. Her dad had faith in her. She *had* to move forward. Then, maybe like Haru said, everything would work itself out.

With her head down to her feet, she had no idea how she managed to make it outside or if she had remained behind her friends or if they had walked off without her. So it came as a surprise when someone yanked on her wrist, grabbed her by the chin, and pushed their lips against hers.

It was the jolt she needed to escape her fog, but when she had a clear enough mind to understand what was happening, Ren was smiling at her. "See? Don't you feel a little better now?"

She had to admit that on some level, his kiss worked its magic. She wouldn't say she felt *better* , but she had a clearer mind, a brighter perspective, and a hand to hold. Makoto had no idea where her friends were, so she didn't try and force a second kiss, but she gripped his hand like a lifeline.

"U-Um…y-yes…t-thank you…"

"I know nothing I say can calm you down, so just stay by my side and I'll keep you from worrying too much, alright?"

Her father was with her in heart and spirit. His voice from the night

before was her strength. The promise that she had made to herself, to bring back her sister so they could be a happy family again, reignited in her heart as her fingers touched the stone around her neck.

Ren would be her physical rock, someone who could see her fading and drowning and reach out to grab her. She would do her best so he wouldn't have to, but she felt so much better knowing he was willing to be someone she could depend on.

With that in mind, Makoto took a deep breath, then lifted her eyes to meet his with all the strength her father knew she had.

"Let's do this."

Chapter 136

Chapter 136

“Aki. Sit down.”

Akihiko paced back and forth in the living room, refusing to sit down and ignoring Minako’s demands. Makoto had yet to return from Sae’s palace, and while he trusted her, he still wanted to know how things had gone. He wanted to know if Akechi had acted out of turn. He wanted to make sure Makoto was okay. He wanted to get started on the next part of their plan…

“Akihiko.”

When Minako called him out by his full name, he stopped in the middle of the room and sighed. “Yeah. I know. But she should have been back by now.”

“Nothing good will happen if you keep worrying.” He turned to her to find her eyes narrowing. “You being in a terrified state of mind will only make Makoto more anxious when she comes home.”

He finally gave in and dropped to the couch. His hands ran over his face, then into his hair, before he threw himself back in his seat. “You can’t tell me that you’re not freaking out right now.”

Minako’s eyes lost the glare and her hands clasped together on her lap. “Oh, I’m plenty worried. But we have to support Makoto. If we bombard her with questions and show our concern, then it’s only going to worry her even more.”

He let his head fall back and stared up at the ceiling. “I guess…”

“I’m sure Makoto won’t need us to ask her how things went. She’ll likely start talking the minute she comes home.” From the corner of his eye, he saw her pick up a book at her side and lift it to her face. “Besides, you have plenty of things to do yourself, don’t you?”

He *always* had things to do, but his priority now was Sae and Makoto. Not that he had really tried to sit down and organize his thoughts and investigate new leads or information. And if he had, he wouldn't have made it too far, since his thoughts would have circled back to Sae and Makoto. He envied Minako, who could sit and read her book like neither of her children were in danger.

Her eyes narrowed at him over the edge of her book, either knowing he was thinking negatively about her or knowing he hadn't done what he was told to do. To serve as a distraction, and to ease her wrath, he whipped out his phone and tried to look busy. It didn't really work, since he never kept anything on his phone and he couldn't access private databases without Fuuka's notes that were in his room.

Minako flipped a page loudly. "Did you find out about Akechi's parents?"

That was one of many things he wanted to research. Given his reaction the last time Akihiko ran into him, there was bad blood between Akechi and his father. It would explain why he got along well with Sae. It would explain why Akechi had it out for him, and possibly other mediocre fathers.

It would not explain why he would target Futaba's mother, unless it was to keep his secret safe. It would not explain why Shido would be involved, if he was involved, which Akihiko knew he was. It would not explain the acts of terror from the subway crashes.

Assuming he found out who Akechi's father was, it wouldn't change anything. Akihiko did find it interesting that they could find something about the teen's mother, but the father was non-existent, like he didn't want to be found. Like Akechi was a mistake and he bolted long before he was born. And like Sae had mentioned before, since his mother wasn't married, that opened the doors to a million suspects. Married men who chanced a one-night stand. Respected men and politicians with prominent jobs that would lose them if an affair was made public, and a *child* was physical proof of that affair.

Akihiko had been living his life following his gut feelings, so when it screamed at him, everything came to a stop.

…What if Akechi's father was *Shido* …

That would explain how the two would have known each other, but it wouldn't explain why Akechi was so willing to work with a man he supposedly loathed. Unless, Akechi was trying to get on his good side, make Shido lower his guard, then kill him the same way he had been killing people his entire career as a hitman.

No. It was insane. Even if Shido was a ghost in every aspect, except on national television, there were a million other people who would have paid money to keep a bastard out of their lives. Why the father would allow Akechi to be born at all would remain a mystery, but the mother may not have known who to tell. He didn't want to speak ill of the dead, but he didn't know Akechi's mother and her way with men. Nor did he know anything about Akechi's relationship with her.

Akihiko suddenly had a purpose with his phone. He had found Akechi's mother by normal means, a simple search on the web. He didn't look too much further into her, but he knew she had committed suicide several years ago. Akechi would have been young, but old enough to realize his mother was dead. It wasn't a life event he would wish on any young child, but that kind of trauma was handled differently by each person. Akechi could have easily snapped then, found out who his father was, and vowed to kill him.

It would all come down to the information he could find on his mother. Because if someone like Mitsuru didn't know Shido was Akechi's father, then how the hell would Akechi know? If his mother told him, and her secret died with her, then only Akechi would know. Would Shido even know he had a son? If not, and Akechi never knew who his father was, how did the two of them meet and did they find out then? Hopefully the woman had a friend, or a relative, or had a reputation, and someone would *talk* .

But to go so many years without the press noticing Shido giving money to support the family he had behind everyone's back, or for the mother to keep quiet for so long if Shido never paid her a dime, it was unheard of. The press would eat that shit alive.

Especially Murakami.

Oh god…

Did she find out about Akechi being Shido's son and *that* had been why she went missing?

"You learn something?"

It took Akihiko a solid ten seconds to realize Minako had spoken to him, but then he turned to her quickly, startled. "O-Oh…" But it was all a theory, nothing concrete. He couldn't tell Minako his train of thought because he could have easily been wrong. There was no need to give her false hope that this insanity would come to an end. Not yet anyway.

But he didn't believe in coincidences. Not this many. And not with the way he was feeling. Now, he just had to prove it.

Minako, however, didn't appreciate his silence. "You told me you were going to start being honest with me."

He sighed. "I know. But it's nothing I can prove right now. It was just a thought that went through my head. I could be wrong."

Her gaze made him feel slightly uncomfortable in his seat. Then, he thought he heard her breathe out a laugh. "When are you ever wrong?"

His first response was to tell her he was wrong all the time. He was wrong to leave Minako all those years ago because she was *dead.* He was wrong to come back to her and force her and their kids to lie because of some ridiculous fear. He was wrong for not trying to reach out to Sae during the years he thought she would be better off without his presence.

Before he could tell her as much, there was a click in the silence that he knew was the doorknob. Immediately, he was on his feet and greeting Makoto long before she was in the apartment entryway. Minako was right behind him.

Makoto turned once the door was closed and jumped in her spot. "Y-You scared me."

At least she was okay. That had been his biggest fear. The last time they had gone to Sae's palace, Makoto had taken a hit for him that had sent him spiraling for hours. He visually examined her for wrappings or cuts, but then he took a few steps closer to her and held her by her shoulders.

"You're not hurt, are you?"

She tensed under his hands, but quickly shook her head. "N-No."

"What happened?"

"Aki, stop it." Minako came up behind him and grabbed one of his arms, pulling him away from Makoto. "Let her breathe." Her eyes turned to Makoto. "Come sit down. I'm sure you have a lot to talk about."

Makoto nodded her head while Akihiko did his best to rein in his anxiety. There were so many things he wanted to ask her, but her safety was the most important thing to him. She seemed well, maybe a little tired, but he didn't want to push her either.

However, Minako was right. The minute they were all sitting in the living room, Makoto spoke freely. "I-I think it went okay. We fought a few random shadows lurking on the lobby floor. I think Ren knew I was overwhelmed, so we didn't roam around too much."

Akihiko resisted the urge to roll his eyes when she mentioned Amamiya. Minako giggled happily at his side. "Such a compassionate boyfriend."

Makoto sat up straighter, lowered her eyes, and a light blush spread over her face. "O-Oh, u-um, I-I guess…"

Eager to steer the conversation back to her trip, Akihiko cleared his throat. "Did you see her?"

Makoto's head remained down, but she began to play with her hands, a common nervous habit. "Y-Yes…but she didn't really act the same way as when we saw her. She was more prideful, and she even told us how to get to her treasure room."

Strange. Akihiko was sure Sae's shadow would have mentioned her hatred for him a million times. It was likely to happen while they continued their investigation, but that first meeting had cut right through his heart. Did Sae only talk to Makoto and her friends because he wasn't with them?

"She thinks she is unbeatable," Minako said softly, causing both Akihiko and Makoto to eye her curiously. "You saw her the other day, Aki. This new prospect of a career has her feeling like she can do anything to anyone at any time. She wasn't like that before."

While Akihiko had no idea how that affected Sae's palace, he assumed that if her mentality had shifted over the months, maybe her palace would, too? Did that mean her palace was born from work and not because of him, like Minako had tried to tell him once before?

Another thing to investigate with Mitsuru. "What about Akechi?" Akihiko met Makoto's eyes. "What did he do?"

She broke eye contact, but he noticed her eyes narrowing slightly. "Futaba managed to bug his phone, so that was good. For the most part, he acted surprised and confused in the Metaverse. Maybe a little *too* much."

Akihiko was tempted to breathe a sigh of relief. The successful ploy to access Akechi's phone would be a huge help in the future. But there was still so much more work to be done. "Did Akechi fight, too?"

If Makoto described that same weird being Akihiko saw when the masked man was trying to kill him, it would be the nail in the coffin. A name would be even better. Because to his knowledge, Akihiko was the only person alive who knew the name and appearance of Akechi's possible persona.

He held his breath when Makoto nodded her head. "He summoned a persona that he called Robin Hood, I believe. It attacked with a huge bow and arrow, and it seemed really powerful."

It wasn't a Loki, but that didn't mean it wasn't the same persona.

“What did it look like?”

Makoto was thrown off guard at his line of questioning, but she at least humored him. “Um, it had a red helmet, white body, blue cape, fairly bulky…if I recall correctly.”

Her description set him back tremendously. The persona he remembered was lanky and black, and carried a sword, not a bow. And last he checked, Amamiya was the recent wild card, so Akechi being able to summon *two* personas was far fetched.

And if that was the case, Akechi really wasn’t the man with the black mask.

Without that foundation, his case crumbled to pieces.

“I-Is…” Makoto’s timid voice sapped him of the rest of his energy. “Is something wrong?”

There was no way he was wrong. Aside from having a different persona, Akechi fit the bill for everything else. And if Shido was Akechi’s father, everything would make more sense. He would just have to verify with Mitsuru that it was possible to have two wild cards in one town.

Actually, he had *no idea* how the whole wild card thing even worked. It could be very possible Akechi had multiple personas, and chose to showcase a different one in case Makoto knew who to look for.

He figured telling Makoto as much wouldn’t hurt. “When I saw the black mask person in that weird vision or dream, he had a dark and thin persona with him. He called him Loki. So I thought that if Akechi was the same person, you would have seen that same persona.”

Makoto quickly asked, “So you don’t think he’s the bad guy anymore?”

Akechi was hiding something, whether that meant he was the black mask culprit or something equally as dark. And right now, Akihiko didn’t have time to be second guessing himself. He was dangerous, and he had access to Sae’s palace. One wrong move or one day with their defenses lowered in doubt could cost Sae her life.

He sure as hell wasn't about to let that happen.

"Maybe he can summon more than one."

Minako said it so nonchalant that it knocked Akihiko back against the couch. He had the same thought, but hearing someone else say it made it that much more possible. "Why do you think that?"

She shrugged her shoulders with a half-smile. "Because you've put too much time and effort into looking into Akechi. You're not wrong, Aki. So there's only one logical explanation."

It was likely, sure, and he would hate to have done all of his research for nothing. Plus, his gut feeling told him he was on the right track. Akechi's glare from the day before *proved* he was on the right track. Shido tempting Sae with a prosperous new career was even *more* proof.

But any good police officer knew not to become so set on one suspect. Until Akihiko could definitively prove Akechi had the ability to summon two personas, he had to prepare for the worst-case scenario that he had been wrong the entire time.

"I-I think so, too." Makoto spoke with half the confidence her mother had, but she held his eyes as she spoke. "There's something about him. I know it's just a feeling, there's no facts, but I do think there's more to him that we didn't see tonight."

Her statement wasn't damning evidence, but it helped him keep his focus on Akechi and not let one hang up stop him. He reached for his phone and pulled up Mitsuru's number. If he didn't at least message her tonight, he would lose so much more sleep. And if Mitsuru disagreed with them, telling him it was impossible for Akechi to have the odd power Amamiya and Minako did, then they could quickly move on to a different strategy.

"You should probably get some rest, Makoto." As soon as his question was sent to Mitsuru, Akihiko slowly stood up and stretched out his back. It wasn't too terribly late, but late enough that Makoto needed to unwind and get to sleep so she could act normal come morning. She nodded her head in return, pushing herself up off the

couch, then wished him and her mother good night.

Minako surprised him and wrapped her arms around his waist from behind. “You’re not wrong, Aki. Stop telling yourself that.”

The air rushed out of his lungs and he had a hard time keeping his balance and not flopping back to the couch. “I have to prepare for that. If Mitsuru tells me there’s no way it’s possible, then I’m back to square one.”

He felt her chuckle. “Honey, if the only thing keeping Akechi from your investigation is something as absurd as a power you can’t explain to an average person in a courtroom, I think you’re fine.”

Well, yes, but… “If I’m wrong, someone else is going to go after Sae that we won’t be watching.”

“Don’t forget that Sae isn’t weak.”

He sighed again. “I know, but she’s not in the right state of mind. She willingly allowed Shido to speak with her.”

“You don’t know that.” She squeezed him, then moved to his side to look up at him. “Sae could have been speaking to him to learn more about him so she could decide where her trust would fall. The only reason she got upset was because *you* were there, and she has an image to maintain around you.”

Akihiko had nothing to say to her, so she added, “She wouldn’t have met with you willingly if she didn’t trust you.”

A hand wiped at his face. “But who does she trust more?”

She pressed her head into his chest with a smile. “You already know the answer, Aki.”

It would have been nice to hear from Sae herself, especially given her recent show of rage.

Minako didn’t try and sway him one way or the other and instead gently tugged him along to their room. Akihiko dropped to the bed, heaved out a long sigh, then toppled the rest of the way until his

back connected with the mattress. He closed his eyes, hoping to focus on his breathing and not on his racing thoughts, knowing he needed to get some amount of sleep to start a fresh day in the morning.

He had much to do, much he needed help with, and much he needed to confirm. With Akechi being monitored and Sae and Makoto safe for the night, he figured it would be his best chance to get a proper night's sleep before something went wrong (or right) the following day.

He should have known better than to doze off on the bed. There was a shift around his head, and when he opened his eyes, Minako was hovering over him with a playful smirk on her face. Even though it was fairly dark in the room, he *knew* she could feel the heat from his face.

"Someone *did* promise to keep me in shape, right?"

Akihiko choked on his breath. "Uh…I-I guess?"

The second her lips were on his, his thoughts came to an end and all his heart wanted was *her.* It was always impressive how easily she could distract him with a simple touch, calm him down with a simple (or not so simple) kiss, all while keeping him on the path he needed to stay on. She always seemed to know when he needed her the most, and she knew *exactly* how to reach him.

And even though Minako was determined to "get in shape", he was quick to flip her on her back and pin her to the bed. Her eyes widened at the movement, but then she returned to her task of removing his shirt.

"I think *I'm* the one who needs to get into shape first."

He treasured the half-second blush before she burst into a fit of giggles. "I don't want to get into shape anyway."

It had been a long time since he had been able to sleep so deeply and peacefully, with Minako tucked against him and with little to no pain from his injuries. In fact, the only thing that even woke him up

was a loud banging on the door and a vocal grumble from Makoto.

“Mom!”

Minako twisted under his arm while Akihiko tried to get his bearings. A solid eight hours of sleep was hard to come by, and his body was clearly not used to it. But when Makoto pounded the door a second time, Minako chuckled into his chest.

“She stole my stash of mochi. So I stole her breakfast.”

It wasn’t unusual for the two of them to plot against the other over stolen sweets, but Akihiko was always a supporter of a good breakfast. (Oftentimes why Minako grew annoyed with him because Makoto always had his support.) But in light of everything that was happening, he found himself smiling.

“You know what I’m going to tell you.”

Minako yawned and slapped a hand to his arm. “Something annoying about protein and metabolism and you love Makoto yeah, I get it.”

He kissed the side of her head before removing his arm from under her. “That and Makoto will probably break the door down if you don’t answer her.”

In response, Minako rolled over and face-planted into her pillow. Akihiko was tempted to reach out and run his fingers through her hair, but he knew where that would lead them, and Makoto was huffing angrily as the seconds ticked by. Reluctantly, he tossed the sheets off of him and grabbed the first pair of pants he could find.

When he opened the door, Makoto was scowling and close to blowing her top. “Yeah, we hear you. Calm down.”

Instead of continuing with her shouts, her hands flew to her face. “Dad! Put a shirt on!”

He heard Minako’s voice yell out from behind him. “I like him better without one!”

Akihiko chose to shut the door on his way out to the living room. To spare either of them any more embarrassment and to get Makoto on her way to school, he grabbed a few yen bills from his wallet and passed them on to her.

“Make sure you get something decent. If I find out you ate sugar for breakfast, I’ll let your mother buy that lockbox to hide her sweets from you.”

Makoto nodded, never once looking back up at him, and swiped the money from his hand. “Then tell her to stop hiding them from me.”

Akihiko smiled. “What’s the fun in that? It’s good police work.”

Makoto stopped halfway to the door, slowly turning back to him. “So…a-are you, going to go back to work…soon?”

It was something he had thought about for a second or two before other issues came up. Did he really want to? Not really. Things had been kind of nice, being able to work on cases without ridicule or people getting in his way. It was nice to be home with Minako, spend more time with her and Makoto, talking to them about his thoughts and questions.

Would he go back? Absolutely. If nothing more than to shove it into everyone’s face because he refused to give up. “Doctor still has to clear me first, but when he does, I’m sure I’ll have one hell of a welcome back party.”

A smile broke out over Makoto’s face and she grabbed at the strap of her bag. “I’m happy for you, Dad. But don’t forget to train me!”

“I don’t plan to,” he told her. “You’ve got a lot of work to do, and I’m glad I can count on you, trainee or not.”

Her eyes sparkled and her opposite hand reached up to hold the pendant he bought for her. “Then you get to work, too!”

She turned and walked out the door a moment later, but her words continued to ring in his ears. He couldn’t let Makoto outshine him just yet. She may have been able to put him in his place a few times, but he still had his pride. He would get to the bottom of the mystery

with Akechi, with Shido, with everyone that revolved around them. It may be the last big moment of his life, but he wouldn't stop searching for the truth, no matter what stood in his way.

Chapter 137

Chapter 137

Makoto kept her head up around her friends, her parents, and oddly slept right through the night.

But when she walked out the door to head to school, everything hit her all at once.

That look Sae gave her and her friends in her palace haunted her. She seemed so arrogant. She knew who they were, yet didn't think she was in any trouble. She acted just as her mother had said: invincible. Makoto didn't even recognize Sae with the yellow glow to her eyes, the prideful way she spoke, the dark aura that she gave off.

Sae had been much different the first time they had entered her palace months ago. While she looked the same, she spoke softly, sad almost, until she exploded in a rage at their father. But this recent shadow never mentioned Akihiko, or how much she hated him. Sae only stated that they were foolish for trying to take her down, they *wouldn't* take her down, and the odds were stacked against them. Then she mocked them, told them to do their best, and vanished into thin air.

It was also a huge relief to her. Makoto had no idea how she was going to react if Sae recognized her, or spoke harshly about their family. Sadly, it also meant it could still happen the further they travelled into her palace. She escaped the situation once, but she had to brace herself for the possibility that may or may not happen.

She also wondered if there would be any versions of her family they would run into. Makoto had only heard from Ren, Ryuji, and Ann that there had been doubles of some of the female students, Ann being the main one, in Kamoshida's palace. Futaba saw her mother. Haru had to face her creepy fiancé. Makoto doubted she would run into herself, but if she was expected to fight a version of her mother, or another version of her father, she didn't think she could do it.

The only reason she felt she was able to sleep at all that night had been because Futaba successfully planted her “bug” on Akechi’s phone. Mitsuru and Fuuka would always know where Akechi was. If he was anywhere near the courthouse, alone, they would know, and one of their other friends could stop him. Anything he did on his phone would be recorded and become usable against him. It was a huge step in their plan, but it solidified nothing.

Especially since her dad now had doubts about Akechi being the black mask guy at all. It was possible that Akechi had another persona, or that Robin Hood maybe was something else when Akechi was about to kill. It made her angry at the same time. Akechi was a bad person. Her dad was good at his job. Akechi had another thing coming if he thought he could use a trick and throw her dad off course.

It was effective, so it now fell on her shoulders to find out what Akechi was hiding without leading him to suspect anything.

She also had a million other problems to work around. She had yet to step foot into the principal’s office to find anything to help her dad. Eiko was still hanging out with her “precious” boyfriend while *he* continued to text *her* . She had to start registering for entrance exams, preparing for entrance exams, and helping *others* do the same. Then she had to keep up her grades, handle student council business, balance school, duties, and Ren.

It seemed like a never-ending stress induced nightmare, but one she had no choice but to accept. At least she knew she could depend on people to help her. Her dad was working on finding out more about Tsukasa. Her council was pitching in more so they could “look busy when the cops showed up again.” Ren was Ren, perfectly content allowing her to have her own time while perfectly content with the time she could offer him.

“Just a minute of your time is all I could ever ask for. Because my time is something I can never take for granted again.”

She really needed to do something nice for him. Maybe another gift? Would he like a thank you card? A dinner date? What did other people get their boyfriends when words and *time* weren’t good

enough? Not that Ren thought that, but she did. And she was determined to find a solution.

However, the opportunity to sneak off into the principal's office after school was not one she would pass up a fourth time. Makoto knew the second she quietly closed the door behind her that she had very little time. Ren would be wondering where she was before too long, so she had to be quick. She had no idea what she would really be looking for, and she felt terrible rummaging around without permission. Would she need a search warrant for this? What if she found something incriminating? What would her story be?

S-Sorry. I had to file away an incident report and I stumbled upon damning evidence about my friends that isn't true!

Hopefully, her dad would take care of the legality of her indiscretion. For now, she had to find something first. Since the interim principal was hardly ever at the school, being a board member and relying on the teachers, she felt like anything she uncovered would have been left behind by Kobayakawa. She felt sick to her stomach, however. She shouldn't be in the room alone, or without a serious reason, in a place that was now haunted by death.

This is your first solo mission. Don't mess this up.

If anything helped her dad, or helped her or her friends, Makoto would be okay. And if she got caught, she was sure her dad would bail her out of trouble. But she wanted to do this on her own. It occurred to her as she approached the desk that she had failed miserably seeking information out of Ren back when she was "following" him, so this could be a redemption of sorts.

Makoto started with papers on top of the desk. The principal hadn't been an overly neat freak, but there had been signs of a mental paranoia with how messy everything had become recently. Papers were littered on the desk. Some filing cabinet drawers weren't fully closed. Random papers rested on the floor.

Almost as if someone else had beaten her to the punch.

The only thing that stood out right off the bat had been a glimpse of

red, half-covered by a stack of papers. She didn't want to reach for it, lest she touch anything and leave fingerprints behind, but she managed to grab at the corner of the red paper and move it enough that she saw what it was.

A calling card. From the Phantom Thieves. But not from *her* friends.

Who would have placed this here? And why? *When?* Did anyone know about it, or had she been the first to find it? From what she could tell, it looked identical to the ones they had sent out to the other targets, but it wasn't sent by *them.* The principal had "died" while they were away, and her dad had taken the heat for it. So why was it still on the desk and not in police evidence if the Phantom Thieves were blamed for the principal's death?

Were they? Or was that only a rumor the police used to throw her dad in prison? And if that was the case, and she was the first person to find the calling card, who was trying to point the blame at her friends? Did Okumura have to die first to make the principal's death seem more believable? Then why arrest her dad at all, a month before Okumura was killed?

She decided it best to leave it alone and ask her dad about it. If the principal really did have ties to the people her dad was investigating, it could be a huge break. The replica card wouldn't be enough, since only a handful of people could prove the Phantom Thieves really had nothing to do with the death. But that also meant there was a good chance she could find something in the office that could tie the principal to the plot her dad was working to unravel.

It was kind of exciting, in a way. Nerve-wracking, exhilarating, *terrifying* …

A quest for criminal schemes while scheming criminally herself…

It was just a shame she wasn't finding much of anything. Every now and then, something would *look* sinister, so she snapped a picture of it with her phone to bring home to her dad. She couldn't move too much around, in case someone noticed, but what she did move around, she made sure to put back exactly the way she found it.

Overall, there was nothing she found valuable. Just the replica Phantom Thief calling card. Some documents thrown on top of other documents. Nothing that grabbed her attention enough. She didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing. It worried her that maybe someone had gotten to his office first and took all the good stuff.

But who? And how would she have not noticed?

She had also lingered for too long. Ren was bound to start noticing the time and start texting her. She'd rather him not worry, then ask questions she didn't want him asking. Not that he would care she was snooping around (again) to help someone, but he might try and help, too. Ren had enough things on his plate; she wouldn't add another.

Plus, she had to do it on her own. For her dad.

She was fulfilling that childhood dream of playing cops with Dad.

Too bad she wasn't really good at blending into the background. As soon as she walked out of the office and into the hall, she heard someone call out to her.

"Makoto?"

She jumped out of her skin. It was a blessing she didn't scream. "I-I wasn't d-doing anything!"

She turned to find Ren walking up to her with a growing smile on his face. "That's usually what people say when they get caught red-handed."

Defeated and her heart still racing, Makoto exhaled deeply. "S-Sorry…"

"What are you doing down here?"

Ren was trustworthy, she knew that, and she knew that if she lied to him, he would know. It was safer to be honest. "I-I was trying to find something in the principal's office."

His eyes narrowed in confusion, but while she hoped he didn't question her further, he did. "Like what?"

Again, lying or being evasive would make him upset. "M-My dad thinks he might…he might have been a part of this…conspiracy…"

Ren clearly hadn't been expecting her to either bring up a conspiracy or to be so open with him on the first attempt. "He thinks the principal could have known something?"

She narrowed her eyes. "Don't doubt my dad."

"I'm not," he replied with his hands up. "It's just…wow. I didn't see that coming."

Her hand rested against her chin in thought. If the principal did work with the same people that had set them up, at least they didn't *know* who the Phantom Thieves were. But then why was Akechi joining them? Wasn't he one of the bad guys, too? Or worse yet, had Akechi's photos been proof that her friends had fallen into their trap?

A poke to her forehead snapped her out of her thoughts. "You're super cute when you're thinking so seriously."

She swatted his hand away as he laughed softly. "This is serious, Ren. I found a calling card on the principal's desk. So why would someone implicate my father for his death and then turn around and implicate us?"

The minute the words were out of her mouth, she regretted them. Ren hadn't been trying to insult her. In fact, he had been his usual, endearing self that often made her turn bright red. And she had kind of snapped at him, and he didn't deserve that.

But he didn't give her the chance to apologize. "How about I make you some dinner tonight? I know this is serious, and really important, but you're burning yourself out."

Was she? She did feel tired, but there was so much to do and time was running out. But, an offer from Ren was something she knew better than to refuse. Especially after being rude to him. "O-Okay…"

The familiar warmth of his hand in hers washed away a good deal of her worries. “I’ve been reading that book you gave me, and I’m eager to try something tonight, if that’s okay with you.”

Everything sounded good right now. Anything *Ren* made for her would probably be wonderful.

Maybe instead of him doing all the work, she could help him? Would he let her? She knew how to cook. Would that annoy him? It would probably annoy her if he kept getting in her way…

Her thoughts were a mix of anxiety and excitement as they both made their way to Leblanc. Makoto knew she should have gone home because she had much to talk about with her dad. She was still a little nervous about Sae and what would happen to her. She had no idea what the future would hold for her, her family, her friends…

But she was also with Ren. Ren made her feel like she could do anything. He made her worries become nothing just by being at his side. He made her feel safe, even if she was sure she was the one who could outmatch him in a one on one fight.

Maybe she could tell him that? She may not be the best with words, but she *had* to say something to let him know she wasn’t taking his time for granted. Even if it came out weird or in a long-winded sentence. Even if it barely came out at all. Even if she burned both of them alive. She was truly thankful for him, his kindness, his comfort, in a time where she should have been falling apart.

“Are you alright?”

Makoto looked up quickly, noticing that they were already heading out of Yongen-Jaya Station. Ren gave her a look that made her feel terrible for spacing out, but coming up with an answer was much harder to do.

“O-Oh…um, y-yes…s-sorry.”

A grin formed on his face. “You don’t need to be so nervous to be spending time with me.”

She was failing to be a good girlfriend. All because she was stressed and she was terrible at expressing her feelings. “I’m not nervous…”

Ren said nothing more to her, but she relished the fact he still held her hand. The short walk from the station to Leblanc, Makoto tried her best to formulate how she would tell Ren what he meant to her. But with every image in her head, she could feel a blush rising to her cheeks and she knew Ren noticed it.

Needless to say, her thought process was very distracted. She figured once she was calm and away from him, she could try again.

It was early enough that Sojiro was still behind the bar with a few customers. The unknown eyes made her extremely wary for some reason, but Ren (as usual), took her hand and guided her to the back of the room. Sojiro gave both of them a look, which only grew more intrigued when Makoto turned away, embarrassed.

Sojiro never commented on it. Ren walked off to speak to him, about what, she hoped was only dinner plans. Then, he returned to her side, reached for her arm, and started tugging her up the stairs.

“I’m sure you have some homework to do while I make a super awesome dinner, right?”

Did she? Of course. Would she have felt better sitting in a booth than in his *room?* Definitely. She just couldn’t find the heart to tell him as much. He smiled warmly at her, and her words died on her tongue and she followed behind him.

“Such a dedicated student!”

Again, Makoto almost jumped out of her skin. Morgana jumped from Ren’s bag to the floor with a loud *thump* , then she swore he laughed at her reaction.

But it was weird to be in the attic, Ren’s room, without the rest of her friends. Morgana didn’t really count, since this was also his space. She only felt Ren come up behind her, his arms wrapping around her the only way she knew, but she was much more relaxed.

He could tell, too. “Make yourself comfortable. I have a surprise for you.”

Makoto’s heart couldn’t take another gift when she had done little to show her affection for him. But Ren didn’t stick around for long, planting a soft kiss to the side of her head before turning and disappearing down the stairs.

She felt weak, suddenly realizing how tired and hungry she was, and how uncomfortable she was being alone in Ren’s space. She pulled out the chair at Ren’s desk, grabbed her bag, and thought it best to look busy and maybe even focus her mind on something besides her lack of romantic comebacks.

Her hand grabbed at the book Sae had given her for Christmas, a study guide for the roughest of entrance exams. And she cracked. Sis wasn’t a bad person. She knew changing her heart was unavoidable, but Sae wasn’t a criminal. She didn’t deserve to have all her crimes and her wrongs known to the public and then drown in the negativity that was bound to follow. She would lose her job. She might not even get a new one easily. And what if Sae still refused help from their father? What would happen to him?

Makoto never wanted a simple life. She had admitted to her parents years ago that she loved the unknown and the adventures, which started backfiring in her face a year before. But she just wanted everyone to be happy. One holiday as a family. One get together that didn’t involve a fight or harsh words or a reminder of the past. Things that she would have loved to have experienced her entire life, but would sacrifice anything to have at least *one* more time.

And maybe because of that, Makoto wouldn’t truly *be* happy. Maybe that was why she was struggling being open and honest about her feelings with Ren. Because as much as she liked being around him, her feelings for him weren’t enough to patch the gap in her family.

He deserved so much better…

Yet, at the same time, she *needed* him. She wanted to be selfish. He made her hope for a happy future. He *loved* her, and that thought still made her tingle.

Makoto grabbed the book and opened it up. She was angry at herself. She loved Ren, even if that feeling was new and she was getting used to it. Her dad had promised her that Sae would be okay. She had promised herself everything would be okay. She would *not* keep drowning in her concerns. They may have gotten the better of her more often than not, but she would fight. Her dad would. Ren would. She would, too.

Several minutes passed, but she got very little done. Her mind was wandering too much to read the words on the pages. She didn't want to study. There were a million things to think about, but she didn't want to think about anything. It was wrong. She was wasting precious time. But maybe this is what Ren had meant when he told her she was "burning out."

A pressure on her shoulders caused her to sit up straight in her chair. "Relax. Or you won't enjoy my hard work cooking your dinner."

It was weird having someone touching her without her sending an elbow into their stomach, but she quickly gave into Ren's touch. She could *hear* the smile as he worked his hands over her shoulders, her arms, the base of her neck. It wasn't until her stomach grumbled that he laughed quietly and pushed away.

"C'mon. You should eat before it gets cold."

She stood up and followed Ren to the couch he had sat down at. He patted the seat next to him energetically, then he pushed a bowl of some kind of soup into her hands. "You made this?"

Ren gasped like she had offended him. She hoped she hadn't. She didn't mean to. "You don't think I'm capable?"

The smirk on his face made her turn her attention back to her meal. "I didn't say that."

"Honestly, I made it last night. I had to go get some ingredients today to top it all off, but I've never made my own ramen before. Your book was a wonderful guide." She felt his eyes on her, and she didn't know what he wanted her to say. "So eat up!"

The smell alone was enough for her to nod her head and take the first bite, then another, and she couldn't stop herself from wolfing down the meal. She couldn't even think of the last time she had ramen. It wasn't a family staple, and suddenly, she was happy for that. It made her appreciate the food so much more. And Ren had made it for her, so it was even more special.

"I also have this for you."

The gift made her heart drop to her stomach. She did her best not to show her sadness, knowing it would greatly upset him, so she reached out for the small bag and took a quick look inside.

"I may have done some research," he said, placing both of their near-empty bowls on the desk next to the couch. "And by research, I mean asking your mom what kind of dessert you liked, and she was more than willing to share a few stories of you stealing her dorayaki when she wasn't looking. Apparently, you're quite the thief."

Inside, that was exactly what she found. Despite being embarrassed by her mother, Makoto was touched that Ren went through unnecessary trouble to buy her something. Again. Without her giving something to him first.

"There's a hidden gem a few blocks away that swears by the gods they have the best confections in Japan. I figured you could be the judge."

She was tearing up at his kindness, but when she looked over at him, his smile warmed her to the point the world faded around her. And in that moment, overcome by a million different emotions, she placed her hands on his chest, and pushed her lips against his.

The warmth became something much, much more intense. Ren must have felt the same, because his hands gripped her hips and finished pulling her onto him. It was an awkward position, but he easily maneuvered her so she was practically sitting on his lap. He never broke their kiss, and if anything, he kissed with more hunger than she had noticed before.

But she didn't mind. It was nice. It made her forget about all the

problems looming over her head. It made her relax, since there was nothing for her to worry about. If she was doing the same to him, then even better.

It was like a drug. His lips, his tongue, his hands, they all helped to rid her of her doubts, her fears, her anxiety. It was so intoxicating that she didn't even realize his hands had managed to untuck her shirt and lifted to touch the bare skin of her stomach. She just kept kissing him, running her hands through *his* hair…

Until Ren suddenly stopped, pushed her back, and turned away from her. It took her some time to come to her senses, but when she did, he was standing and putting her book back into her bag.

"D-Did I…" Had she done something wrong? Granted she didn't really know what she was doing, but it wasn't *bad* , right? Maybe he didn't feel the same way she had? "Did I do something wrong?"

She waited with bated breath for what felt like hours before Ren exhaled and fell into the chair at his desk. "No."

Makoto only wished she could believe him. "Then why are you so upset?"

His hands cradled his head, but she swore he grunted or cursed under his breath. "I'm alright…"

Liar. "Ren…"

"You should head home."

But she refused. She would not leave until she knew what she did wrong. "You can be honest with me, Ren."

The tone in her voice made him sigh deeply, until finally, he looked over at her. The smile he wore was forced, so she braced herself for the worst. "You did nothing wrong."

"I don't believe you."

His head fell to his chest. "I mean it. But…you know…you came onto me pretty fast and my brain kinda…shut down…"

Was that a bad thing? “O-Oh.” Her eyes dropped to the bag of dorayaki on the floor by the couch. “I-I didn’t mean to…I just…I d-didn’t know w-what else to do…”

A light chuckle brought her eyes back up. “You don’t have to do anything, Makoto.”

She was desperate to escape now. But her bag was over by Ren, and she needed it to go to school tomorrow. And he noticed her frantically thinking over a plot. He pushed himself to his feet and closed the distance between the two of them. When she tried to back away, he stopped her.

“Sometimes, I don’t think you realize what you do to me. How sometimes a simple kiss after school isn’t enough. How sitting next to you makes my heart hammer painfully in my chest and I can’t think about anything else. So…y-yeah, when you kissed me more aggressively, I…I gave into some of my darker impulses, and I never want to treat you like that.”

It was hard to make eye contact with him, but she also felt like she had to. “I-I didn’t mean to…to do that…”

Another chuckle. This time at least, he wrapped his arms around her. “My biggest fear is that you have no idea what we’re getting into, and you won’t know until it’s all over. The last thing I ever want is for you to regret anything with me. And that was why I stopped you.”

She felt his lips on the top of her head. “You’re beautiful, and amazing, and smart. And I never want to be the reason for tears in your eyes.”

Makoto pushed away from him. “I don’t understand, Ren. I-I thought you liked…this…”

“Oh, trust me, I do.” His hand lifted to the back of his head, and she thought there was a slight tint to his cheeks. “So let me just ask point-blank. If I wouldn’t have freaked out and stopped you and I put you in bed and had sex with you, what would you have done afterwards?”

The color drained from her face. Had *that* been what Ren was thinking about when she was kissing him? What *would* she have done if it continued? She would like to think she would have freaked out, but she could also vividly feel his hands on her stomach, and they were moving higher before *he* pulled away.

“This. This is why I don’t want to do anything beyond a kiss or a hug.”

He sounded so heartbroken. So she shook her head and stepped back into him. “I-I guess you…you just took me b-by surprise.”

But she grabbed his hands before he could turn around. “Ren, I’m sorry. You do so much for me and you make me so happy and you make me so much more comfortable when I know I’d be losing my mind without you and I want to make you just as happy and I keep diving into the moment and I’m sorry I really am.”

There was a terrible silence that followed. Makoto couldn’t look up at him. She was so embarrassed that she couldn’t even make sense. Rambling on about her jumbled-up feelings for him was the *last* thing she wanted to do. It wasn’t enough. And now, it would leave Ren confused and upset that she couldn’t speak from her heart as easily as he could.

When she felt a hand on her shoulder, she panicked. But Ren only pulled her closer until he could rest his head against hers. “You really are something else.”

His voice was soft. His hand at the base of her neck was relaxed, yet firm to keep her against him. His other hand moved to her side, similarly to where it had been a few minutes ago when she was on top of him.

“Your happiness is my happiness, Ren.” Both of her arms wrapped around his back as she turned to rest her head against his chest. “S-So…m-maybe we could…um, y-you know, t-try one day?”

A few seconds passed with nothing from him, but then she felt his

chest shake with laughter. “I don’t want to push you into this.”

“I want to.”

Did she? Maybe. She was curious about it now. How would any time spent with Ren be a *bad* thing? If he wanted to, then why not? She knew little about the subject, and she would be *horrified* to have the talk with her mother, but maybe it would help, too. Or scare her to the point she would never be able to be alone with Ren.

Hopefully not. Because she really did love him.

“I want to, too,” he said just as quietly as she had. “So let’s just advance slowly, alright? And if you ever feel uncomfortable and want to stop, please tell me.”

She quickly nodded her head. “A-And you tell me…t-too.”

He lifted her chin so he could kiss her. “And right now, I’m dying to know if this bakery really has bragging rights.”

A laugh burst from her lungs that she tried to hide behind her hand. “Okay.”

But he stopped her before she could reach for the forgotten bag on the floor. “But I hope you know that I love you, more and more each day. And while I know you panic because you can’t express your feelings into words well, I hear them loud and clear in your silence. So, thank you.”

He kissed her forehead, then threw himself on the couch again, a smile splitting his face in two. “I really need to know the truth. And then I’m going to need your help finding the true dorayaki haven so I know where to get the best sweets for my queen.”

He pulled on her hands and wrapped his arm around her shoulder once she was seated against him. “On one condition.” Makoto turned to him, his eyes dancing with amusement. “You can’t tell my mom once we find out.”

Ren leaned his head against hers and laughed into her ear. “Deal.”

Chapter 138

Chapter 138

“Why won’t you save me?”

She reached out, hoping her voice would get him to turn around. Maybe she hadn’t been loud enough? But he noticed her sister. So she tried fighting the hands that kept grabbing her, telling her to work, to lie, to hate. She was scared. And when she was scared, he always helped her.

But the hands were strong. She had to yell again. “Daddy!”

She caught his smile, but it was down to her little sister, both of whom walked off and left her alone in the darkness.

“Dad!”

Sae shot out of bed with a scream caught in the back of her throat. She looked around the space, darkened by the time of night, and only began catching her breath when she realized she was in her room, safe, alone.

It had been an extremely long week, a few months really, but nothing could have prepared her for Akihiko’s hug when he had stopped her outside her office the other day. He had never been so emotionally physical with her in so long, since she was a naïve child who respected and loved her father. He had been reaching out to her more, giving her almost too much to think about and reconsider, but *that* had been the tipping point.

He loved her. She could see that now. And she actually *hurt* parting ways with him because deep down, she knew he wouldn’t be speaking with her again.

The nightmare hadn’t been uncommon. It usually occurred after she ran into Akihiko and he had a look that made her *regret* ever keeping her distance. She knew that if she told him she was having

terrifying nightmares about *him* , he would have dropped everything to comfort her. Just like all the times she was young enough to believe there were monsters and bad men lurking in her bedroom at night and he would search her room with her so she knew she was safe.

Akihiko may not have been a father in terms of paperwork, but he really did try, even after she screamed at him and told him she hated him.

Sae turned to check the time, knowing it was late, but hopefully early enough to try and fall back asleep. However, instead of the numbers on the clock, she found the trophy sitting on the nightstand behind it.

She had won it back when she was a teenager. They had just moved to Tokyo, a much larger city than the small town she was born in, and it took her a long time to adjust. When her dad pushed her into joining a club at school, she decided to humor him and joined the martial arts club. Within a week, her clubmates were impressed with her strength and skills, telling her that they would sign her up for aikido tournaments around the city.

Sae thought nothing of it at the time, but when she told her parents, her *dad* had been elated. He pushed her to train, gave her a set schedule to stick to (with a diet plan included), and always checked up on her progress.

But he never showed up to any of her matches. Her mom did from time to time, but outside of a subtle wave when they both made eye contact, she didn't do much.

It wasn't a big deal, at first. Her matches weren't all that special, even if she won them all. That and her dad always congratulated her when she returned home, and that was better than nothing.

But then she had reached the national level, something that her school had never done in the past. Her teammates were proud of her. Her school and classmates were proud of her. She was proud of herself. Her team may have not won the national title, but coming in second place was historic all its own. *She* accomplished something she could have been proud of.

It all meant nothing to her in the end, because when her eyes searched the stands for her father, who had *sworn* he would make it, he was missing. Her mom and Makoto had greeted her after the event; her mom hugging her to the point it hurt, and Makoto too interested in the shiny piece of plastic she had been given to remember the night with.

Akihiko had one chance to redeem himself, and he let her down. He let her down to the point that she felt like she was *still* climbing out of that pit he dropped her into. And that night, after returning home, ignoring him completely, and all but throwing the trophy at him, she swore she would never cry over how much she *hated* him ever again.

He wasn't worth it.

And the trophy reminded her how much he had let her down. It reminded her that he hadn't been a *father* when being a father was *easy.* One match was all she asked him to attend, and he couldn't even do *that* for his daughter.

But he could take Makoto out to celebrate her position as student council president. He could beat a man half to death because Makoto was likely the topic of the conversation. He could sacrifice himself because *Makoto* threw herself into a criminal's hideout and nearly got herself shipped off as a sex slave.

He would have done anything for her sister. Protect her. Train her. Teach her. Defend her from the law. And all Sae had asked of him was an hour or two of his time to show him something she had prided herself on.

It was the push she needed to forget about the sorrow and regret and bury it behind her anger and jealousy.

Sleep wouldn't come for her now, so Sae grumbled loudly and pushed herself out of bed. It wasn't unusual for her nights to be short and restless, but she also didn't want to rush off into work too early. Instead, she threw herself into her morning routine of making the strongest cup of coffee and pulling out her laptop to do some private investigating.

But her mind wasn't quite where it needed to be. Another memory flitted through her mind, remembering the first time she took a sip of her father's coffee as a child, and *hated* it. He had laughed at her, told her it was an adult drink, and she vowed to prove him wrong. She had also gone to school that day with a different energy, and she accomplished much without feeling tired. She figured it was the coffee, then from that day on, she tried to sneak a few sips before her father knew any was missing.

Makoto had caught her once, and her childlike curiosity backfired epically in her face. Sae chuckled to herself, recalling the look on Makoto's face when she gagged comically and dropped the cup to the ground. Sae had laughed then as her sister wiped her mouth, still spitting out the remnants of the coffee, then watched as Makoto sank to her knees and started to cry.

"I just wanna be like you and Dad, Sis!"

Sae had actually stopped drinking coffee her last year of high school because the drink made her heart hurt, her vision blur, and everything went red. But Makoto, old enough to know coffee wasn't made by *magic,* had learned all she could about how to make it herself. Makoto would always set a cup out for her, then smile with her big smile and tell her, *"I hope you like it, Sis!"*

Once Sae left the house, Makoto would give her gift cards for holidays. Sae took Makoto with her once to a coffee shop, a small moment of weakness after a terrible week searching for a new job, and Sae suddenly realized Makoto had bought the cards so she could sneak in some freshly made sweets for herself.

It was cute, because Makoto would just smile at her like she was happy to be with her, and Sae gave in every time.

"It will be our little secret!" Makoto had said after Sae made the comment that if their mother found out, she would be very upset they didn't invite her along, too.

From then on, coffee had a different meaning. She could see Makoto, her eyes shining, her smile bright, and her excitement contagious. Sae also landed her prosecutor job a few days later.

She thought for the longest time that she could accept her father's neglect because Makoto had been her strength, and he had to help take care of her when Sae could not.

But then Makoto brought all her anger back to the forefront of her mind. Sae had left that damn trophy at home when she moved out, refusing to take it with her and remember a time of her life she hated. She wouldn't let her father keep her down, and that trophy carried powerful memories and rage and she would rather not hold on to it.

Makoto gave it back to her.

"We were cleaning out your room and we found this. You did so well. You should keep it."

Sae had wanted to ask why they were cleaning out her room, but it didn't matter. Makoto, however, shoved the trophy back into her hands.

"You're really strong, Sis. You fought really hard. And I know you're upset with Dad for not being there, but I know he's sorry. He doesn't come to my matches either, so it's okay."

Makoto's cheeriness was laced with some mild disappointment, and the anger flared back to life in her. How dare Akihiko treat her sister like she was nothing. Makoto deserved so much better, but she was trying to be happy about it. So Sae took the trophy, promising herself that she would make him regret ever abandoning either of them just because he was *scared.*

And it had been sitting on her nightstand ever since.

To this very day, Sae wondered if the only reason she didn't truly hate her parents had been because of Makoto. Her sister, while incredibly foolish at times, was her weakness. When Makoto had cried as a child, Sae did everything she could have done to comfort her. The last thing she ever wanted Makoto to feel was betrayed, alone, and scared.

Even now. Regardless of how jealous Sae was of her, or how angry

she had made her, Sae loved her dearly. She was the only other person in the entire world who knew exactly how she felt. Makoto may have decided to accept it, to move on, but she knew Makoto had the same thoughts that kept her up at night.

When her first cup of coffee was done, Sae started a second. She *had* to focus. For every minute her mind wandered to her past and those unexpressed emotions that followed, her parents won. She had a lot of work to do. She had a new job to consider, Akechi to look into, a group of phantom vigilantes that may or may not have killed Okumura. There was the truth about Amamiya, whom Akihiko himself had allowed to stay with them, knowing he was a *criminal.*

Then, there was Masayoshi Shido.

Sae found it odd, but not coincidental, that the man had made himself known to her shortly after Akihiko had mentioned him by name. Why Shido wanted a word with her, promising her a wonderful new career, she could guess. She just didn't like thinking about it.

He only approached her to get under Akihiko's skin. And it had worked beautifully. Akihiko had been *terrified* that night Shido had left her, because *he knew* why Shido had really gone out of his way to speak to her.

Like a good father…

Sae shook her head and downed half of her second cup of coffee. Akihiko had neglected her for *years* . One (or a few) acts of worry and fatherly love weren't going to be enough to clear him of the past. After all, where was he at years ago when a man tried to corner her outside her home and tried to attack her? Where was he at when people would call her and threaten to kill everyone she loved if she didn't drop a case?

She didn't *need* him, but he could have shown her how much he cared without her having to drop a hint. *He* was the one who needed to prove himself, not her. And just like every other time in the past, he let her down.

The rest of her cup of coffee was gone a moment later. She stared back at her laptop, took a deep breath, then got right to work. She had looked into Akechi a few days ago, and hadn't learned anything she thought would be helpful. His mother was gone, his father was unknown, and he didn't seem to have any siblings. How Akihiko assumed he was behind the mental shutdowns was beyond her.

A different world…

Akihiko had told her that he had a strange power. He worked with Mitsuru. Mitsuru was that cool, but intimidating aunt figure that seemed to hold back on secrets when Sae was younger.

Maybe that was why she always came to Akihiko's defense. Because they had worked for so long together and she considered it a repayment of sorts. Or perhaps Mitsuru was there to keep Akihiko from spilling secrets that she didn't want out in the open. However, Sae only knew the truth would come from Akihiko or Mitsuru. One she refused to speak to again. The other, she was too afraid to speak to.

There could have been a link between Mitsuru and Isshiki, or at least between Akihiko and Isshiki. He knew who she was, then didn't seem surprised at all when she had told him Akechi had been the one to tip her off. But how would Mitsuru know Isshiki? Was this strange "other world" that link? Mitsuru and Akihiko knew about it. Akechi knew about it, if he really was the culprit. So Isshiki would connect that circle of information.

Someone at the office had to know why the Kirijo name struck fear into anyone. Mitsuru had power, a family that had power, but she never knew *why* . If she could find that out, maybe it would help her understand why Akihiko had been so convinced Akechi was the bad guy. Better yet, if she could figure out this other world, she could also figure out who these Phantom Thieves were and bring them in for questioning.

Makoto had to know them. Sae refused to believe she was one herself. Aside from the bizarre events, Makoto had been easily frightened. Thunder made her cry and jump into bed with her (with her favorite Buchimaru plushie, of course) and Sae would have to

calm her down. Sae doubted this new world was filled with sunshine and rainbows, so Makoto acting completely normal was a deciding factor.

Amamiya, however, not so much.

Sae knew very little about him. The teen had earned Akihiko's trust somehow, but how and when she didn't know. He was a criminal, supposedly arrested for assault back in his hometown. She decided to look into him while he had crossed her mind. Her laptop could access the police database at least, and Amamiya wasn't too difficult to find. Since he was a juvenile, she assumed his records would be locked, and she would have to call up a quick favor if she had a reference.

But to her surprise, they were not.

A part of her wanted to call up the parole office and demand them to lock the record, but she *really* wanted to know more about him.

Ren Amamiya. Age seventeen. Born in a small coastal town outside of Odawara. Incredibly intelligent, good grades, no prior problems with the law.

Then she caught something that gave her pause. The police report from that night had stated this boy allegedly pummeled a man to near death. But there was no name, one shaky witness who hadn't even testified in a courtroom, no evidence, and he was sentenced regardless. It was as if the police had been *bored* and Amamiya was in the wrong place at the wrong time and was thrown into a cop car…

Being pushed into lockup for a night wasn't uncommon for young punks, but there was nothing about Amamiya's incident that proved it was an act deserving of a year *probation* outside of his home.

"Akihiko took Ren in because he was scared. Because there's people like you who roam the streets looking for innocent victims to attack after something as grand scale as that man's death last night."

While Akihiko tended to treat the youth with more respect than they needed, allowing Amamiya to stay with them, with *Makoto* , was a huge sign of trust. Akihiko wouldn't have let Amamiya stay with him if he knew he was an honest criminal. At the same time, Akihiko wasn't one to *not* know everything about someone he vouched for. So Akihiko had to have known about Amamiya's record, which meant either Amamiya was a smooth talker, or he hadn't committed any crime at all.

It was just a strange time to take in a teenager if Amamiya had nothing to do with Okumura's death…

But would she have been that terrifying figure, roaming the streets, looking for a random person to pin the death on? Or had her mother been trying to throw her off the trail because Akihiko *knew* Amamiya was involved?

It still hurt, knowing her mother thought of her as a *terror* when there were men like Akechi and Shido roaming about at night…

She grumbled under her breath. Why did all of her questions need to be directed to Akihiko? How was it that there was not one single person besides him she could ask? Makoto maybe, but a part of her didn't want to know how much she did or didn't know. That and if her parents found out Sae was hounding her again, all hell would break loose.

Maybe she could have a one on one chat with Makoto. Talk to her about these annoying and pestering feelings to someone who knew them as well. Then slowly ask her about school, Amamiya, and anyone else acting suspicious. She also knew messaging Makoto would set off alarm bells, in which case she could panic and her parents would find out.

Now that she thought about it, Amamiya did seem very determined to protect Makoto after Akihiko's boss tried to kidnap her…

Sae decided she would continue her research during the day, then she would swing by Makoto's school to meet with her.

So, after spending hours behind her desk at the office, trying to pull

all her thoughts together, she left uncharacteristically early and headed off to Aoyama. She didn't have to dodge Akechi, nor did she have to deal with her boss or anyone else. It was a strange twist of fate, almost like she was meant to have this time off to speak to her sister. She arrived a few minutes before the last bell, bought a can of coffee from the vending machine (it was terrible), and tried to occupy the wait by continuing to work on her phone.

An hour went by, and Sae remembered that Makoto probably didn't just leave right after school. She had to tend to issues long after school hours. But Sae also refused to leave, knowing that another free day like this would be hard to come by. Not that she was finding anything of value on her phone, and she really hated to waste her time so much, but she couldn't walk away.

However, almost another hour later, Sae caught Amamiya smiling and chatting up her sister as they walked out of the school. It unnerved her, because Amamiya was still a criminal in her mind, and Makoto knew better than to associate with him. Regardless of the fact that Sae had *allowed* him to take her home, there was something… *off* about the way he was looking at her, and smiling at her, and she giggled and blushed and…

Her stomach fell.

Were they *dating?*

No. Akihiko would have murdered the boy, she was sure. There was no way in hell he would have allowed Amamiya to stay with them if he knew they were dating. Sae quickly walked up to them, eager for the truth, yet eager to push Amamiya off her little sister and warn him never to touch her again.

Makoto, thankfully, saw her coming and released Amamiya's hand. "S-Sis?"

Amamiya, thankfully, pulled away like he was scared. Good. Sae narrowed her eyes at him just in case. "What are you doing with my sister?"

Makoto stood between her and the teen. "W-What are you doing

here?”

Sae kept her eyes on Amamiya for a few more seconds, enjoying the way he seemed to cower with every passing moment. “I wanted to speak to you.”

“M-Me?”

Her sister had a bad habit of hesitating, like her father, and it angered her. But, she had to remind herself she had come with a purpose. If she pushed Makoto away too early, she would lose that chance to speak with her. So, Sae took a deep breath, then tried to come across as kind as she could.

“I was hoping to check out a new coffee shop. And I’m *sure* they have those dorayaki buns you love so much.”

Makoto stared back at her in confusion. It took her several seconds to find her voice. “O-Oh…”

Sae narrowed her eyes to Amamiya. “Assuming you don’t have a *date* already planned.”

“N-No!” The way Makoto blushed and shyly tried to hide away from her made Sae sick to her stomach. “I-I m-mean...I-I just didn’t…e-expect you…”

Again, she had to relax. Whether or not Makoto was dating a criminal wasn’t her priority. Right now. Plus, if she played her cards well, she could get the truth out of her as they spoke. If she kept being angry and intimidating, Makoto was going to walk away.

She took another deep breath. “I didn’t mean to surprise you. I just had a free afternoon and thought I would spend it with you.”

Makoto looked taken back, and Sae began to worry if she was coming across *too* determined and it was rubbing her sister the wrong way. A few seconds later, before Sae could reel it back, Makoto broke out into a familiar smile.

“I’d like that, Sis.”

A wave of relief rushed over her. Sae gave herself a second to compose herself, then turned her eyes to Amamiya. “I do appreciate you keeping my sister safe, but I’ll take her home today.”

The boy still looked terrified, but at least he nodded his head. He shot a glance over to Makoto, and there was some form of communication between the two of them that unnerved her. However, neither of them said another word as Amamiya bowed slightly to her and walked past them.

“So,” Makoto said with a bounce in her voice. It was like she was excited to finally spend time with her. “Where are we going?”

Sae felt a smile tug on her lips. “There’s a new shop that opened in Asakasa that I’ve heard about. I figured you’d like to see if their sweets live up to the hype.”

Makoto smiled, then began following after her once Sae turned to head to the station. Her sister was oddly quiet, almost nervous, or realizing a little too late that she had walked into a trap. The trip to the café wasn’t but a few minutes, but as soon as they were seated, Sae had to break the ice that had built since they left the school.

“I know you think I’ve asked you here to interrogate you, but I promise you, I’m not going to.”

Makoto kept her eyes down to the sweet bun she had bought for her, but she didn’t make a move to eat it. “I-I’m sorry…”

It was hard to have a heart to heart with anyone, but it was suddenly that much harder to speak to her sister. “Makoto, I know I’ve been harsh lately, and that’s why I’m reaching out to talk to you.”

“So you can get Dad in trouble again?”

Her eyes narrowed at the food in front of her, causing Sae to lean back in her seat. “Why do you defend him so much?”

“Because he’s a good guy.”

Sae had to bite back her initial retort. “Do you ever feel angry with him for never being there for you when you were younger?”

Makoto's eyes lifted, her anger turned to sorrow. "Do you?"

She wasn't about to lie to her. But she sure as hell knew she couldn't be truthful without being *angry.* "Do you know what bothered me the most? He never acted like cared about me, nor did he ever show up for anything I thought he would have to support me. But I may have been able to move on had it just been *me* , but it wasn't. And I wasn't about to let him ruin *your* life either."

There was a stifling pause, then Makoto exhaled deeply, her eyes falling back to the table. "I know you don't want to hear this, but I think Dad realized how he treated you, and that's why he's done all these things for me."

Sae leaned into her hand. "So that excuses him?"

Makoto shook her head. "Maybe not, but what else do you want him to do? He can't go back in time and make you happy. And when he tries to reach out to you now, you push him away. You don't see how much he hurts when he comes home after talking with you."

Do not get angry .

"But I think you're hurting, too. That's why you wanted to speak to me about this."

It was the comment she didn't want to hear from Makoto. Because she was right, and Sae *never* cracked. Especially in front of her family. Yet at the same time, she couldn't stop the words from escaping her mouth. After years of keeping them repressed, all of her emotions rose to the surface for her sister to see.

"I only wanted him to tell me he was proud of me." Sae felt sick to her stomach saying as much, but Makoto didn't stop her. "I had no one, for years. I kept thinking that one day, he would show up and be the person I always thought he would be. But I see the way he takes care of you, and a part of me is extremely jealous that he didn't do the same for me."

She felt Makoto's hand reach out for one of hers and hold it tightly. "Sis, Dad loves you. And I think he loves you more than me. I'm

sorry you had to sacrifice so much for my sake, but I hope you know that Dad would do so much for you if you allowed him to."

Her hands curled. "He wouldn't do a *damn* thing for me! Why do you defend him? He knows everything that could lead me to a promotion, a victory, but he holds back! Why?"

She had been getting it off her chest, but at the same time, she realized that Makoto may know something as well. So when her sister was quiet, retracting her hand, Sae knew her entire family knew more than what they were willing to say.

"Dad has nothing to do with any of this."

Sae poked the fire. "And Amamiya?"

Makoto dropped her head, but didn't respond like she expected. "Ren saved me from Kamoshida. Dad knew that."

"So why did he take him in?"

Her sister hesitated, then, "Because if he didn't, you would have arrested him."

It made her heart sink into her stomach. "So you think I'm a monster?"

"N-No!" Makoto quickly made eye contact with her again. "I-I'm just saying…um, y-you're s-scary sometimes."

A small part of her was upset at Makoto for viewing her as much. But before she could comment on it, Makoto released another breath.

"It's hard for me, knowing why you hate Dad and why you're so angry all the time. I can kind of understand. But what you don't understand is that I love Dad. And he loves both of us. He has been more personable with me recently, yes, but what you don't see is that he's done just as much for you."

Sae huffed angrily. "No he hasn't."

The look in Makoto's eyes made her mind blank briefly. "He knows about you arresting innocent people, but he's never had you arrested and defends you from the accusations. He let you arrest him because if he fought back, you would have received the backlash. He was willing to face unknown danger when he was kidnapped to keep you safe." Makoto narrowed her eyes again. "So yes, Sae, Dad has done just as much for you as he has for me."

She really wanted to reach across the table and slap Makoto, but either Makoto caught her tension or read her mind. The red tint of her eyes faded and she was more timid and reserved.

"But I never thought the day would come that you would be so open to talk to me about how you feel. So…I-I'm grateful…"

Sae ran a hand over her eyes to nurse an oncoming headache. The anger she could deal with and use to her advantage. But the confusion and *regret* she could not. In an attempt to keep her mind from spiraling, she had to change the subject.

"So what? Am I not considered a friend to you now? You prefer a *boy* over your sister?"

Makoto literally jumped back in her seat, which was oddly humorous. As soon as Makoto noticed the smile and quiet chuckle Sae gave off following her comment, she turned back into that six-year-old child that kept her motivated and *happy* .

"It's nice to see you like this, Sis."

Thanks to that, Sae decided to enjoy spending her time with her sister. She could look into Amamiya on her own time. She could look into this other world on her own time. The only thing that mattered to her now was her sister, the smile she had by simply talking with her, and it was a breath of fresh air given the hell that she found herself in.

Chapter 139

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“You’re going to burn a hole in the carpet, Aki.”

The carpet was the *least* of his concerns. Akihiko ignored Minako and resumed his pacing. He had received a text from Makoto over an hour ago that Sae had caught her after school. They were supposed to be going to a coffee shop to *talk* , which is why he was so anxious.

While it was nice of Makoto to tell him why she would be late, he didn’t want her sister to pin her in a tight corner until she broke down and confessed. And if Sae really did want to work for Shido, as horrific as the thought was, she could have placed Makoto in serious danger by meeting with her.

Akihiko knew that Sae would never want to harm Makoto, but Sae was blind. In that blindness, her sister could be hurt, or used as leverage against the *both* of them.

A powerful tug on his hand caused him to fall back onto the couch. There was a jolt of pain in his knee, but it was quickly forgotten about when Minako glared at him. “Calm. Down.”

He couldn’t keep his fear hidden. “Makoto willingly walked off with Sae. She’s going to corner her into confessing.”

“Sae may be full of wrath and hatred for the two of us,” Minako replied, her voice growing weaker, and his heart hurting more as she spoke. “But she loves her sister. She won’t do anything to hurt her.”

His hands covered his face, wishing for her statement to be true, but also knowing that Sae was determined to get her answers. If anything, she would use Makoto’s innocence and love for her as the perfect excuse to pounce.

Minako also added, “But if it helps you relax, Makoto can take care

of herself.” She slowly returned to the book she held between her hands. “She’s going to be fine. Both of them.”

Whenever Minako spoke so passionately, it was hard for him to disagree with her. But now, he had to wait however long for Makoto to return home to know (or ask) if things had gone well or not.

He didn’t have to wait too long. Akihiko was quick to his feet, against Minako’s quiet attempts to keep him on the couch. He greeted Makoto in the entryway, and she didn’t appear to be distraught.

It didn’t keep him from asking her, “Are you okay?”

Makoto, however, only chuckled and waved him off. “I’m fine, Dad.”

Not the reaction he expected, but it was welcoming, nonetheless. Makoto wasn’t the best at hiding her emotions, so her happy spirit and playful nature made him think that her conversation with Sae hadn’t gone too terribly. Still, he had to know.

“What did you two talk about?”

Her hesitance, however, left him wondering. Had they talked about the Phantom Thieves and the Okumura case? Had Makoto been keeping a secret of some kind that she felt more comfortable telling her sister about instead of him? Or did she not want to tell him that they had a normal conversation and nothing was wrong with Sae?

“A-Actually, w-we spoke about…you…”

Makoto’s answer left him feeling a mix of several things. He was confused, because when in the world would Sae willingly hold a conversation with someone about him? He was upset, because he likely knew that it wasn’t a *good* conversation. But he was relieved at the same time. They were both talking about a common link and not a million other things Akihiko figured Sae would like to talk about.

“And I think she feels really bad about being so mean to you, but she’s too prideful to admit it.”

Her words took the breath out of him. Did she really think that? Sae had been popping up more in his life, but that didn’t mean she felt

any differently about him than the day she told him she hated him. Sae also wouldn't let her guard down, even around her sister, to admit something like that. But Makoto had a sharp eye, and she knew her sister well, so there was a small flicker of hope that Sae really was tipping back to her normal self.

Had that been an effect of them going into her palace? Akihiko had gone once, and things blew up between the two of them afterwards. Makoto went with people Sae didn't even know, and maybe she was back to normal? Would they still have to change her heart to bring her full circle?

"I honestly feel like she's stressed out at work," Makoto added. "I think that was really how she snapped. She's just been using you as a scapegoat, and now, she's regretting it."

He rubbed at the side of his head. It all sounded wonderful, but there was still the fact he hadn't been there for Sae years ago when he should have. And she would always hold that over his head until the day he died.

In his silence, Makoto took a step closer to him. "It was nice, being able to talk to her like I always could when I was younger. But that doesn't mean she's on the right path now. We still need to save her and find out who's at the bottom of this giant plot."

Right. While saving Sae from her own misery was a wonderful motivator, it wasn't the whole picture. They had to find out more about Shido, those he worked with, how and if Akechi was involved at all. There was no time to get side-tracked, even if the thought of Sae returning to normal on her own was a better thought…

"I…I think I found something today."

Makoto's voice made him jump slightly. "Huh?"

Her eyes fell to the ground, unable to look at anything for too long. "I, um, I went to the principal's office…after school."

Akihiko forgot that he had sent her to look for information, but he was suddenly excited to hear about what she had found. "What did

you find?”

She shrugged her shoulders and reached for her phone in her bag. “I-I don’t know. I took several pictures and thought maybe you could find something?”

She handed him the phone once she reached the photos she had taken, but he was eager to sit again. Between the pain growing in his knee and the overwhelming thoughts, it was for the best to move the conversation to the living room. Minako exchanged a smile with Makoto, but never said anything about her time out with Sae. A part of Akihiko wondered if maybe Minako was upset, since she had been denied her monthly chats with her daughter for several months now.

“There’s…something else, too…”

He could ask Minako another time. Right now, he had to focus. Makoto had done him a huge favor by sneaking around to find information. He wouldn’t let that go to waste. “And what’s that?”

Makoto sighed deeply, clasping her hands together on her lap. “I found a calling card on his desk.”

He stared back at her, waiting for her to clarify, but then it hit him.

The Phantom Thieves used calling cards to point out their targets. Kamoshida personally brought one to him. He saw the ones over Shibuya for Kaneshiro. But the principal was never someone they went after. So how did a card find itself on his desk?

“I-I’m not for sure what it means, but it also looks like someone was there before me. The office was a mess, and Kobayakawa wasn’t that messy.”

If someone had beaten Makoto to the punch, who? One of Shido’s men? And what would they have been looking for?

…Had Kamoshida been a part of it all, too? The principal was extremely defensive of a man who abused his students and likely withheld statements to keep his precious alumni from facing jail time. If his regret about harboring Kamoshida had been why he went

to the police station, there would be no need for Shido and friends to murder him, right? And if he hadn't been murdered and just died of natural causes while across the street from a police station, why pin the death on his head? And why try and find something in his office?

"I also don't understand why someone would leave a fake calling card in his office if the Phantom Thieves hadn't been suspects in his death."

It was all bizarre. But Makoto kept thinking out loud. "But I also wonder if perhaps it was left after Okumura had been killed, since no one would believe the Phantom Thieves would have killed a man they hadn't named. But now, the public is already swayed into thinking we're murderers, so now they can blame us for the principal's death, too."

That could very well be the case. She was incredibly sharp in her thoughts, so much so that he was positive that was the point of the calling card. Now, the question was who had planted it and when.

He finally looked over at her, but she was busy racking her mind for more answers. "I think you've done a wonderful job, Makoto." She snapped her head up at him, and he had to chuckle at the surprise on her face. "I would need more evidence, but I think what you've said is very possible. You don't recall who had placed it there or when, do you?"

A second later after she recovered from his praise, she shook her head. "No. I haven't been in his office in a long time. I know I'm usually the last one to leave school, but I could have missed someone stepping in."

"Do you think Akechi put it there at the festival?"

Both Akihiko and Makoto turned to Minako, who flipped another page in her book like she hadn't just thought of a possible lead. Was it possible for Akechi to have found the perfect time to slip into the principal's office to drop the card off? The festival had happened right after Okumura's death, which would have been the perfect time to try and frame Makoto and her friends.

But then why wouldn't he out them in front of the school? Akechi was back to being everyone's favorite detective, so his word would have been taken as truth. Not only did he keep the truth a secret, he asked to join them. And then didn't produce the same persona that had attacked Caesar in that demented world.

He realized that they were both waiting for him to answer. "Well, I don't know. It sounds great in theory, but if Akechi really wanted to cause a commotion, he would have done as much in front of the students, not in secret. There's too much to risk by dropping off the card and hoping it's found at the right time by the right person."

"You told me once to trust my gut feeling." Makoto slowly came to her feet, her eyes glazed over with determination. "I know he's the bad guy. He's likely known about me being a Phantom Thief for a while. He knows about our relationship. He's never said anything because he's saving it for a grand finale. Just like with this card. It's all leading up to something much more powerful. He may have even anticipated me searching through the principal's office for information."

She could be right. At the same time, she could be wrong, and the real culprit would get away with years' worth of murder and terror. "What I don't tell you is that sometimes, you're wrong. It's never bad to trust that feeling, but don't focus your time on him one hundred percent. There's no concrete evidence."

"He tried to kill you." Makoto glared angrily. "What more *proof* do you need?"

When Minako acted like this, he could stand his ground and argue back. When his *daughter* acted like this, he felt overpowered and he lost his strength to fight back. "Just…don't trust him, but don't go out of your way to criminalize him, alright? I'll figure him out one way or the other."

Makoto huffed, which would have been cute had she been five and upset he told her she couldn't have dessert before dinner. Akihiko appreciated that Makoto was willing to help him out, especially since he couldn't be out and about yet, but she was a little *too* single-minded. And single-minded actions tended to go horribly wrong. He

would rather her not find out the hard way, but telling her as much might prove futile as well.

At least she simmered down over dinner, muttering a quiet apology before she took her first bite. As Minako twisted the conversation back to her school, her friends, *Amamiya,* Akihiko noticed Makoto growing more and more reserved. He could assume why, since Minako had sparkles in her eyes and amusement in her tone when she asked their daughter about her *boyfriend* . He was glad Makoto said nothing, or answered the basics to keep her mother from exploding in joy. He really didn't want to hear *details* and he sure as hell couldn't go beat the boy into a bloody pulp without getting an earful.

But his phone went off in his pocket, a relief he hadn't been expecting. He thought maybe it was one of his old co-workers, excited to be seeing him soon, or Mitsuru about to give him another heap of paperwork to dive into.

He rolled his eyes at the message on his phone. It was from Ohya. *"Heeeeey I miss yooooouuuu!!"*

Sometimes, he thought he was lucky for being so oblivious to the fangirls that supposedly followed him around in high school. And that Minako had been quiet and much more modest to handle. While she may have acted overly excited and romantic at times, she never acted like *this* .

"Girlfriend?"

Akihiko's eyes found Minako, and he almost dropped his phone. But she laughed him off, leaning into one of her hands propped up on the table. "I'll forgive you this time. After all," she said, turning to their daughter sitting next to her. "I'm sure she'll feel more comfortable talking about boys if you're not here."

"Maybe I'll swing by *his* place and say hello."

She kicked at him from under the table. "You do that, and you'll be sleeping on the couch for the rest of your life."

The glare was what really kept him quiet. It wasn't like he was serious. Maybe. But a part of him was curious to know what Makoto wanted to talk about that she couldn't talk about with him present. However, the buzzing of his phone made him realize that he *had* to speak to Ohya again. With more information and better questions to ask, she could help him discover more answers.

He could feel Minako's eyes on him as he prepared to walk out the door. For once, she was eager for him to leave, which once again made him pause in his thoughts. If something was wrong with Makoto, Minako would tell him, right? Makoto never really hesitated before speaking to him. So he was worried that either there was something weighing on her heart from her talk with Sae, or it really was about Amamiya.

Maybe he *would* swing by Leblanc for "coffee" and a chat. After he met with Ohya, of course.

It was also the first time in a long time that Akihiko was allowed to leave the house without someone with him, without a crutch, without someone being in danger. It felt kind of nice. He was a few days away from the doctor clearing him to go back to work, and leaving the apartment to do some investigative work made him feel like he was back in the swing of things.

But damn did he forget how busy Tokyo subway stations could be. He struggled with the cramped trains, sometimes putting extra weight on his injured leg and he winced in pain from time to time. Stepping off in Shinjuku was a blessing, and he was more than happy to skip the line on the escalator to take the stairs.

He was proud of himself for managing the stairs out of the station, even if he was slightly winded. His knee wasn't hurting like he thought it would, so he told himself while he waited for the doctor's clearance, he could at least start training again. Even if Minako hadn't said anything about him being out of shape or *fat* , he sure as hell felt that way from time to time. It would be nice to get active again, given the future that awaited him.

A few minutes later, Akihiko was standing outside the bar he hadn't been to since Makoto sought refuge when they were last out in

Kabukicho. He hadn't spoken to Ohya in weeks, if not months. There was so much he wanted to ask her, to talk to her about, yet at the same time, he knew not to get his hopes up. What would one reporter know about a man no one else knew about, someone she asked *him* to look into?

Still, he had to try. He pushed open the door and was greeted, as always, with a warm smile from Lala. "My goodness, look who rises from the dead."

Dead? She laughed at his surprise, then waved him over to sit at the bar. "I'll even pour you a drink, on the house."

It had been quite some time since he was allowed to *drink* , and he knew that dealing with Ohya would require at least one or two of them. Akihiko took his seat, then glanced around the room for said reporter. "Where's Ohya?"

It was rare for him to beat her to the scene, especially if she was the one who had texted him first. Lala only shrugged her shoulders, poured him a full glass, and passed it over to him. "I'm sure she will be here soon, sweetie."

Several minutes passed and he didn't hear a word from her. He exchanged small talk with Lala to pass the time, which blew up in his face when she brought up his daughter and the "beautiful woman" from before. It made it hard for him not to down the drink in one second, but he had to keep a level head. Ohya would *love* to arrive to see him drunk off his ass because Lala embarrassed him…

But just when Akihiko's concern grew into panic, Ohya *finally* burst through the door. She slammed it shut behind her and pulled on the doorknob, as if keeping someone out that was following her. He stood from his seat, finding her behavior odd, and walked up to where she was still holding the door closed.

"Something wrong?"

She didn't release her hold. "Yeah. Word got out I was talking to a cop about something other than my job and my boss is *pissed."*

Akihiko really wanted to know how many eyes were on him, and those he associated with, at all times of the day. “They know you’re talking to me?”

Lala approached them from behind, a key in hand, and bolted the door shut. “You always cause me so many problems.”

Ohya, strangely enough, beamed back at the bartender. “Tryin’ to keep things lively around here!” Then, she looped an arm through his and yanked him back to the bar. “You started without me?”

Akihiko rolled his eyes. “You were fashionably late. I could have been doing other things.”

She waved her hand, but there was a flash of something over her face that he didn’t recognize. “Yeah, my bad. But all is well now! Lala-chan, fill me up!”

Lala, however, crossed her arms and glared at the woman next to him. “Not until you explain what’s going on.” She sighed heavily. “I’ve only had to lock my doors once, and that had been back when you were hiding from the wrong people.”

“Meh,” Ohya snorted. “A good reporter ain’t afraid of no one.”

He may not want to know the past incident that was mentioned, but he sure as hell was eager to know who she was running from *now.* “You’re running from your boss?”

Next to him, Ohya went silent. Her eyes darkened and narrowed as a hand came to prop her head up. “He caught me snooping around through Kayo’s belongings. And without even knowing what I was looking into, he points a finger in my face and tells me I’ll lose my job if I keep digging.”

“Does he know what you’re looking into specifically?”

Akihiko held his breath. If Ohya’s boss knew she was on Shido’s trail and knew she was talking to him about it, then that would explain why the press only viewed Shido in a positive light. It would explain why every rumor that the press would normally eat up was left in the dark. It would explain why Murakami, someone who would push

past her superiors, like he would, was missing with little to no concern from the people she worked with.

She sighed, some amount of sadness and weariness showing in her posture. “I don’t know. All I wanted was to find her. She was my friend. No one else seems to even care she hasn’t returned. And after all this time, she’s dead. I know she is.”

It was hard to see Ohya, someone so loud and energetic, fall silent in regret. His heart clenched tightly in his chest, knowing all too well what it was like to lose a friend. It may have been a lost cause, but at least Ohya, and Murakami herself, deserved answers. And while there was no evidence of foul play, if Shido was the reason Murakami disappeared, he knew it would be covered up well.

He just wished the lump in his throat would pass so he could ask some more questions to help. It took time, and a few sips from his drink, before he could speak up. “Did you learn anything recently? You seemed rather eager to see me today.”

He hoped it would spark some sort of life into her, but it didn’t. “It’s funny, because I wanted to beat you over the head when I first met you. But you’re also the only person I’ve ever met who wants to help. I’ve heard about what you’ve been going through, how many people fuck you over, but you still try. I’m not half as brave as you, or Kayo, and a part of me realizes what I’ve asked of you. So, I’m sorry.”

Her apology shook him to his core. Had it not been for her asking to investigate Shido, things could be very different now. Possibly in a good way, but he would be so ignorant of the world, the darkness lurking where his children worked and went to school. He would walk this path a million more times if it helped take down a man who had murdered innocent people just because they stood in his way.

Plus, it also seemed to be the link bringing his family together. Makoto was much stronger. Sae was talking to him again. It wasn’t perfect, but he wouldn’t want it any other way.

“Don’t be,” he told her, reaching out for his drink again. He kept his eyes in front of him, but the grip on his glass tightened as he

struggled to find the words to say. “Shido already had a target on my back long before I knew what he was doing. Hell, in fact, I should be thanking you. Had it not been for you asking me to look into him, he probably would have killed me by now and I wouldn’t have even known a thing.”

When she remained silent for several minutes, he spoke back up. “But the last thing I ever want anyone to feel is afraid. He’s a powerful man. He has powerful friends. And honestly, had it not been for my children, I probably wouldn’t be able to stand up to him at all.”

Akihiko cringed when he mentioned his kids, but Ohya either didn’t care or already knew. He felt her eyes on him, so he continued his thought. “It’s my job to protect the innocent from the evils of man. Too many people have suffered because of him. Too many people have *tried* to stand up to him. So as long as there’s still breath in my body, I *have* to finish what they’ve started. If I give up now, knowing everything I do, I’m going to die with regrets, and the terrifying reality that he’s going to ruin so many more lives. That’s a hell I don’t want to live in, so if I give it my all, I can at least go out strong and not cowering.”

“You really are something else, huh?” He turned to her just as she hung her head. “I can see why Kayo liked you so much.”

He released his glass and noticed Lala pouring a new one for Ohya. “I don’t want to ask you to do anything you’re not comfortable with, but if you want answers, I need your help. Shido might be a tough enemy, but Mitsuru is equally just as powerful. We’ll do what we can to help you as well.”

A small smile, followed by a laugh, came from her. “You’re asking me, a pitiful reporter who does nothing but track the next big hot story, to help *you* take down the next Prime Minister?”

Akihiko lifted his glass with a smirk. “Yeah. How much bigger of a story do you want?”

He felt it then. The tension and sorrow vanished, and the atmosphere was bright once again. Ohya slapped him on the arm,

then grabbed her glass and brought it to his with a subtle *clink.* “I guess that would be one hell of an article to write. Might even make front page news.”

“I’m glad to have you on our team.” He extended a hand once his drink was down on the counter again. “Just don’t overwork yourself.”

“Ha!” At least she reached out and shook his hand with that insanely chipper attitude he had come to expect from her. “Like I have anything exciting to report about.”

Akihiko threw out his first question. “How much do you know about Goro Akechi then?”

A hand rested on her chin, thinking. “Hmm, he’s popular. He’s smart. He’s good looking. Nothing more other than that.”

“Do you know anything about his family?”

Another pause to think. “I don’t think so? Kayo wasn’t a big fan of him. Too annoying. Said the kid had a lot of issues. Then said it was because of mommy issues, but I just brushed her off.”

His heart started hammering away in his chest. “Do you know anything about his mother?”

“I’m sure Kayo has *something* on her.” Ohya frowned. “Assuming I can *find* it. Why are you asking?”

Akihiko swallowed hard. “We know his mother committed suicide when he was younger. But no matter how hard we look, nothing shows up about his father. Any information about *her* could lead to *him.”*

She eyes him curiously. “And why would that be important?”

“Well,” he started, trying to keep his voice even. “If Murakami was looking into his past, I’m assuming Akechi is no good. Or mixed up with the wrong people. But there’s a missing link between him and Shido that I’m trying to prove, which is why I’m curious about his parents.”

“You think Akechi’s father knew Shido?”

He took a deep breath. “You could say that.”

Ohya withdrew into herself again, then clapped her hands together a second later. “Tell ya what, I’ll look into his background and talk to people I can trust. I’ll let you know what I find. Consider it a thanks for all your hard work and never giving up.”

She lifted her glass once more, and he sure as hell wasn’t about to pass up the offer. “I’d appreciate it.”

“Hooray!” She smashed her glass against his, almost knocking it out of his hands, and shot her hands up into the air. “Lala-chan, this is cause for a celebration! Let’s drink up!”

As soon as her drink was gone and Lala was refilling her glass, she clapped him several times on the back. “I cannot wait to bring this bastard to his knees. He’ll regret crossing paths with me and Kayo for sure!”

Akihiko couldn’t agree more.

Chapter 140

Chapter 140

“Makoto.”

Her daughter *finally* looked up at her. “Y-Yes?”

Akihiko had taken off not even ten minutes ago. Ever since, Makoto had been silent, as if wishing her father hadn’t left at all. Makoto had been oddly quiet when she returned home, which wasn’t unusual, but the longer the silence dragged on, the more Minako worried she knew the problem.

Makoto wouldn’t talk about a fight between her and Ren if her father had been around. “Is this about Ren?”

Her daughter had Akihiko’s genes. Surprised, her eyes went wide and she seemed desperate to keep the subject from coming up. “Um…d-do you…do you know where D-Dad went? I-Is he o-okay… a-alone?”

But Minako knew to tackle the issue headfirst. “Makoto. You can talk to me. You know that.”

Makoto’s head fell to her chest, her right hand still clutching her chopsticks over her plate. “I-I know…”

“So what happened?”

Minako was content with the silence that came between them. Akihiko often took that time to think, to gather his thoughts, before speaking without hesitation. Makoto likely needed the time to do the same. In the meantime, it made her more curious as to what the two of them had fought about that made Makoto so upset.

Was Makoto upset with *her* because Ren probably bought some dorayaki for her with her advice? Or was it typical teenage drama, school rumors, fighting in another world? Minako had so many

problems with Akihiko when they were younger, and she sadly wished she could have spoken to her parents about them.

Would they have terrified Akihiko to the point he broke up with her? Would they have snapped at her for being too dramatic? It made it hard to be a good mother now to Makoto, unsure of what to do. Makoto was her daughter, but Ren was a good kid, too. They both likely needed to vent, or take a day to themselves, or…

“IwanttosleepwithRen.”

Her words came out so fast that Minako had a hard time understanding what she had said. Makoto’s face turned a bright shade of pink, her eyes squeezed shut in either pain or embarrassment. But having dealt with Akihiko for years, she knew the look.

It took a lot of stomach and heart to say whatever she had said. Minako only wished she had caught it. “What?”

When Makoto didn’t look back up, or relax in the slightest, Minako chuckled softly and reached out for her hand. “Makoto. It’s okay. You can tell me what’s on your mind. You don’t need to be so afraid.”

“Y-Y-You…You’ll b-be…m-mad…”

Maybe she was getting old. If she had half the mind to focus, she wouldn’t be asking Makoto to repeat herself. Now, she might not say it again. “I won’t be mad, honey. I want to help.”

Makoto carefully and calmly placed her chopsticks back down on their holder by her plate. Minako allowed her to take a few deep breaths, ready to focus intently this time around.

“Never mind.”

Minako released her breath in one, long exhale. She noticed Makoto put her hands on the table’s edge, but before she could push herself away, Minako called out to her. “I hope you know that I’m not going to let you keep quiet about this. So, you can either tell me now, or we can try again when your dad gets home.”

She got the reaction she wanted. Her daughter narrowed her eyes at the plate in front of her before closing them completely. She was either angry or trying to find the best way to speak whatever was on her mind. Minako was more than willing to give her the time. She now knew without a doubt that it was about Makoto's relationship with Ren, and she was an expert at pulling teeth to get someone to open up to her.

Makoto resembled Akihiko in more ways than one. It was frustrating at times like this, but she also needed to practice patience herself.

"D-Do you…um, r-remember when y-you said…you said that if t-things happened…um…I-I could, y-you know, t-talk to you?"

It took Makoto a solid minute to ask, and while her nervousness was cute in a way, Minako honestly had no idea what she was trying to say. "So, what happened?"

Makoto's hands flew to her face, trying to hide her darkening blush, so Minako racked her brain to help her out. She always told her she could talk to her about anything. Granted Makoto favored Akihiko, she also kept a lot to herself. However, Makoto rarely enjoyed speaking to her father about Ren, since Akihiko wasn't as excited about it as she was. But what had happened between them that was so bad Makoto couldn't even tell *her?*

"You're really going to make me say it?"

Something uncomfortable started to grow in her stomach. Makoto had a pretty obvious temper when she was angry, so unless she *killed* Ren over something and needed help burying the body… But she would have told Akihiko first. And Makoto would be more in a panic and not… *embarrassed.*

Did she say something stupid in front of Ren? She doubted that he would care, given he was a wonderful kid, but Makoto did tend to overthink more often than not…

"Before I went to Hawaii, you told me that if anything… *happened* , I could talk to you."

That uncomfortable feeling in her stomach reached out and squeezed her heart. Makoto sank away, as if knowing Minako *finally* understood what she was trying to say. Despite Makoto's willingness to be open with her, Minako couldn't help the sharp tone of her voice. "You *slept* with him?!"

Makoto shook her head violently, her hands still shielding her face. "N-No! I-I mean…h-he stopped me…"

Minako had to catch her head with her hands before she hit the table. She didn't really know how to feel. She was grateful nothing *happened* , yet at the same time, the image was in her head. Makoto was still the baby. And while Minako thought herself lucky with Akihiko, she couldn't tell if the same would be true for Makoto.

So help any boy that broke her daughter's heart after taking something so precious away from her…

But, it was also Ren. He was a good boy. And Makoto had just told her that *he* stopped *her* . It was all new to the two of them, well, Makoto at least. It actually spoke volumes about Ren's character that he was willing to stop her when most boys his age would not have.

"Mom."

She also told Makoto she could talk to her, but here she was, giving her reasons to never speak to her again. "Sorry. It's just…surprising, I guess."

"You're mad."

It was rare to hear Makoto speak with the angry tone she was using with her now. It also made Minako realize that *nothing* happened and her daughter was seeking her advice. She straightened her back, and for the first time in years, she struggled to meet her daughter's eyes.

"I'm actually happy you're talking to me. And I know you don't want to hear this, but you're still our little girl. I just…don't really think about this kind of thing happening."

Makoto at least lost much of her anger, her eyes dropping back to the table. “I don’t know what to do.”

It was hard enough forming words to say to her, much less speaking them. The lump in her throat and the knot in her stomach were almost too much to overcome. “What do you want to do?”

Makoto jerked in her seat, giving away her answer before she even replied back. “I-I don’t…know…”

She did, but she wouldn’t say it. But Minako decided to spare Makoto any more nervousness and cut to the chase. “I can’t say I approve. I still think you’re too young. You haven’t known him for but a few months.”

Makoto opened her mouth to interrupt, but Minako held up a hand to stop her. “But I can appreciate the fact that you are asking before jumping into anything. The last thing I ever want for you is to regret something you did on a whim, but I know you’re smart. I know he’s smart. And if the both of you decide together this is something you want, then it’s not my place to stop you.”

The red painting Makoto’s cheeks slowly started to disappear, but her eyes still carried some lingering fears. “Y-You won’t be mad?”

“Look at me, Makoto.” A few seconds later, when her daughter’s eyes locked with hers again, she added, “I don’t want to scare you, or sway you out of your ultimate decision, but know that this is something you’ll never get back if you cross that bridge. While I truly want the best for you and Ren, he’s also the only boy you’ve been with. So I don’t want you to look back on your time with him and have it be soured because you gave yourself to him thinking he was the only one you’d ever be with.”

She thought she said too much. Ren really was a wonderful kid. The fact she had spoken so negatively about him made her own heart hurt. Makoto deserved to be happy, and she was happy with him. Putting that thought into her head might create unnecessary tension in their relationship.

She tried to backtrack a little. “I don’t mean to sound so pessimistic.

I really do like Ren. Just…take things slow, okay?"

Makoto nodded her head slowly, which was a great relief. It meant that she wasn't angry, or upset, or going to rebel against her and do whatever she wanted. "We um, we talked about it…the same day I guess I kind of pushed myself on him. S-So you can trust him, Mom."

A small smile tugged at the corner of her lips. "I'm glad he's looking out for you." She was happy for Makoto, finally finding someone who brought out the best in her. Minako really was being too much of a downer. So what if Makoto never found another guy she may or may not like better than Ren? While Minako really didn't want her daughter to suffer the same path of life she had to take, she knew she had loved Akihiko from the first day he stuttered out an invitation to dinner. She regretted sleeping with him so soon, but she loved him. And she really did like Ren.

"P-Please don't tell Dad…"

Minako couldn't stop the bubble of laughter that escaped her throat. "You don't think he's smart enough to find out?"

Enjoyingly enough, Makoto's face burned brightly as she hid behind her hands once more. "Mom!"

"I won't tell him, honey," she said with a widening smile. "But I will warn you, if I notice any dorayaki missing from my cupboard, it's fair game."

The conversation ended with that. Makoto got one last glare in, a reminder of their silent oath, but before she could take her now empty plate into the kitchen, Minako stopped her. "I want you to keep talking to me. If you're ever uncomfortable or need anything at all, please let me know, okay?"

Makoto gave her a weak smile and a subtle nod of the head. "Thank you, Mom."

Once dinner had been cleaned up, Makoto quietly walked off to her room with one last thank you. Minako sat on the couch, bored,

having recently finished her book, and flipped on the TV. It was a weird routine she had with Akihiko after dinner recently, where they would both unwind and sit and flip aimlessly through channels. It calmed him down, which in turn, calmed her down. She missed him suddenly, hoping he wasn't out getting himself into trouble or *killed* , and her hand clenched around her phone unconsciously.

She was about to call him when something on the TV caught her attention. An interview she would have passed up any other day.

Minako was taken back by the man's appearance, looking to be a normal human being. If she were to have seen him on the streets, she wouldn't have blinked twice. He wore a pleasant smile for the camera, spoke with a strong and vibrant voice, and it was easy to see why so many people respected him.

Her hands flew to her head a second later. All she heard was a terrible screech. She shut her eyes to help fight off the pain, and she soon felt someone's hands on her shoulders, trying to reach her with soft spoken words. The pain was overwhelming. She couldn't even think, nor could she make out the voice of who was asking her what was happening. She could have sworn her head was going to explode if another second went by.

Then, just as quickly as it came, it vanished. The lack of pressure left her lightheaded, and Makoto, who had been the one kneeling in front of her, caught her before she crashed to the floor. Minako felt all of her energy leave her as Makoto tried to lean her back against the couch.

"Mom? Are you okay?"

Some of her senses slowly came back to her, and she was met with a horrified Makoto. She took a deep breath, hoping her sudden migraine was from lack of sleep or stress, then tried to compose herself better for her daughter.

"I-I'm alright. Sorry."

In the past, Makoto would have nodded and let her rest, but her eyes narrowed at the evasion. "You're not alright, Mom."

But what could she tell her? Minako didn't even know herself what had brought on the pain to begin with. She had eaten well enough, had been sleeping pretty okay recently, so she thought her body was in normal form…

It was something about whatever was on TV. The pain had been similar to when she met Ren for the first time, but much longer. It made her forget what was even happening, what she had been watching, so she had no idea what it could have meant. Was some force trying to shut something out of her life? Had it been a link to her missing powers? Or had it been nothing at all?

"Mom."

Minako slowly shook her head, pulling out of Makoto's arms and leaning back on the couch. "Sorry. I'm fine now."

"What happened?" She noticed Makoto look around the room, her hands still up in case Minako needed help again. "I came out here to tell you goodnight and then you're in pain."

Minako looked over her shoulder to the TV, trying to catch any lingering program details so she could figure something out. It was a news channel, but it was on a different story, or the same one? They were talking about the stock market, and she highly doubted her pain was initiated from *that.*

What had been airing moments ago? She worried now she would never know.

"I didn't mean to worry you."

The look in Makoto's eyes told her that she wasn't walking away until she was truthful with her. So, Minako sighed, relaxing back into the couch again, and thought it best to be open with her. "I saw something on TV a little bit ago. The headache came out of nowhere, but I may not be sleeping all that great. Stress, ya know? Happens when you get older."

Makoto gave her a curious look, trying to tell her she was far from convincing. Then, she shook her head and focused her attention

back on her. “The last time you had a headache come out of nowhere, you met Ren for the first time.”

How she remembered that, Minako wouldn’t know, but from Makoto’s perspective, it might have been more terrifying than she thought. “I don’t know why it happened.”

She hoped that would be the end of the questions, given another minor headache was starting to come alive. However, Makoto pushed herself up to her feet and placed her hands on her shoulders. “I’ll get some water and some medicine. Don’t get up.”

Minako was tempted to laugh at her and tell her she was fine, but she figured some water would help her. The headache started to roar back to life. It wasn’t nearly as painful as it was before, but it rendered her blind for a moment of two. Something was happening on the TV she couldn’t hear, but she could have sworn she heard something about a new government? Faith? Restoration? Her ears were ringing, and she could have been imagining it all, but she could feel Makoto return from the kitchen and stand in front of her again.

“Here.” Makoto had to reach out and grab her hand and place a few capsules in her palm. “Take them. It should help.”

Minako humored her, knowing that the cause of her headache wouldn’t go away with medication, but it could ease the pain enough to sleep. And she sure as hell wanted to put this moment behind her.

“I’m home.”

Makoto was on her feet faster than Minako could tell her to stay put. If Akihiko found out about her migraines, he would fret over her to the point it was annoying. But her head was pounding enough that she couldn’t hear much outside the slight noise from the TV.

But Akihiko didn’t give her two seconds to pull herself together. “Are you alright?”

She really didn’t want to have to explain herself again. “I’m just tired, is all.”

The concern in Akihiko's eyes made her regret saying anything at all. "You haven't been yourself recently."

"I'm fine," she said with a slightly stronger voice. "It just came and went. Makoto gave me some medicine, so I'll be alright."

He clearly did not think the same, but he relented and looked over to where Makoto was standing behind her. "I'll get her to bed. But thank you."

Minako knew from Akihiko's tone that he wasn't finished talking to her. But he left her alone in the meantime, allowing her time to think of something to tell him so he wouldn't panic. Yet she couldn't think of anything. She could barely manage the walk to her room without stumbling. The bed looked far too inviting and she couldn't fight back the desire to drop onto it.

She thought she had fallen asleep when a weight next to her caused her to jerk back into consciousness. The room was dark, but light enough that she could see Akihiko frowning next to her. Her heart cracked, knowing he was worried about her and he didn't know how to help her.

"I'm okay, Aki."

"You know, the last time you said you were okay and you were not okay, I thought you died in my arms."

Her stomach knotted tightly as she tried to push herself up on the bed. His hands held his head, like he was suffering a headache of his own. She felt terrible, sick even. The last thing she ever wanted to do was make him live through that horrific memory again.

Once she was sitting up, Minako grabbed both of his wrists and pulled them away from his face. "Aki, I'm okay. I just had a really bad headache, but I'm fine now."

"You've been much more reserved and unlike yourself for days now." He groaned loudly, but he never pulled his hands out of hers. "I thought at first you weren't sleeping, or eating well, and now you're telling me you have headaches…"

“This is the first time I’ve had one on this level since meeting Ren.” On instinct, one of her hands lifted to the side of her head. “It was weird, like someone is trying to keep me from knowing something. And today, I saw something on TV. I don’t know. But I do know I’ve been eating and sleeping just as fine as I have been for months now.”

Akihiko seemed to relax hearing as much, but there was still some lingering fear in his eyes. “You also passed out in the Metaverse. I don’t think you’ve been the same since.”

Sadly, he was right. She hadn’t felt the same since that trip with him and Makoto. She didn’t pass out or feel tremendous pain when she went with her friends, but she hadn’t really been *looking* like she had been with her family. However, she was still certain the headache was purposeful. It was a message of some sort. She just had no idea what had prompted it.

There was a sigh of relief from him a moment later. “I worry about you.”

She tugged on the hand she held with hers and leaned into him. “I know you do. But I promise you, I feel fine.” She felt his head drop to hers and her heart clenched in her chest when his arms held her tightly.

“I don’t know what I would do if I lost you again.”

His tone broke her heart. Minako could only squeeze his hand and hope it was enough to calm him down. “I’m sorry I’ve been worrying you. With everything that’s going on, I guess…maybe I have been keeping more to myself.”

“Just…” He sounded so defeated. Minako only pressed herself into him more. “Just please tell me if you ever feel like this again.”

A weak laugh broke the silence. “Well, I may not be an expert in why this is happening, but like I said, it first happened when I met Ren. Then, I found out he was a wild card like I was. So I feel pretty confident that this headache was a message of some kind.”

She sensed the change come over Akihiko. “What do you think it was about this time, then?”

She couldn’t tell him. He would worry so much more about her and keep her from going out. Would she go out to seek answers? Maybe. Mitsuru would be a great person to talk to. Better yet, she would like to take Ren into the Metaverse to see how *he* communicated with Igor. And Akihiko would *never* let her go alone with him.

“Tell you what,” she said, pushing off of him gently so she could look up at him. “I promise to take care of myself and tell you if I feel like this again, if you promise me to be careful when you’re out and about.”

Finally, his frown faded and he offered her a weak smile. “I promise.” Then, he lowered his head to rest against hers. “But if something does happen to me, I want you to promise me you won’t murder anyone. Let Mitsuru handle bringing them down, alright?”

Despite her fear seizing her heart, she forced herself to nod her head. “I promise.”

It was just a promise Minako knew she wouldn’t be able to keep.

Chapter 141

Chapter 141

Ren was beginning to think that his team was advancing a little *too* quickly this time around.

He really did want to help, but he was worried Makoto was pushing herself. He knew she wanted her family back, the accusations to go away, but she was drained. The two times they had entered her sister's palace, she fought carelessly. Hell, had Haru not been standing next to Makoto one of those moments, Makoto would have been seriously injured by an attack she didn't even see coming.

Makoto put on a hell of a façade around school and their friends, and she tried to hold up around him. And for a few days, he thought she really was handling herself as well as he expected.

He only knew how wrong he was when they were all leaving Sae's palace that second night and Akechi made some off-handed comment about her sister. Ren hadn't heard it, but Makoto *snapped.*

"You don't know her! Stop acting like she's your friend! She would end you in a heartbeat if she wanted to!"

Akechi had been surprised by her outburst, but the rest of them even more so. Ren was worried her snap temper was about to land Akechi a fist to the face, but thankfully Akechi apologized and didn't say anything more. However, at the station, before Ren could pull Makoto aside and try and calm her down, she took off to a different line without a word.

Haru stopped him from going after her. *"She needs to let off some steam. You going with her is only going to frustrate her more. Trust me."*

Makoto at least had texted him once he was home and told him she was sorry for her behavior. He didn't hear another word from her that night, or the next morning.

He was currently standing at the platform in Shibuya, trying to keep his eyes up in case he spotted her. He wanted to ask Mitsuru how things on their end were progressing, since telling Makoto to be patient would only blow up in his face. He was already dreading having to tell her they would be going to the Metaverse that afternoon. But he knew he couldn't walk away from her and let someone else tell her as much. It was his job as team leader, and her boyfriend, to be there for her.

The train was approaching the station when Ren thought he saw her. It was unusual for Makoto to be this late to school, but given the past few days, he couldn't fault her. He put his phone in his pocket, pulled his bag over his shoulder, and slowly made his way over to her. She caught him approaching, but a part of him was saddened when she didn't smile or shyly hide away from him.

The first words out of her mouth were, "I'm sorry for what happened yesterday."

Ren shook his head softly, then reached out to grab her arm. "I know you're upset."

"I shouldn't have said anything."

Her eyes narrowed sharply. "Makoto. It's okay. I know you're going through a lot. I shouldn't be pushing you the way I have."

There was still a disapproving look on her face. "I could have jeopardized all of us."

Ren decided to give into her unsaid wish and frowned deeply. "Alright. Don't do it again."

His heart sank into his stomach when Makoto lowered her head. She said nothing else to him as she headed towards the train. Ren thought it best to bring up the conversation again once they were on their way to school.

It was just unfortunate that the doors closed before they could get on. Makoto seemed to be more upset by it, but Ren refused to let her be so uncomfortable around him over her emotional snap with

Akechi. He reached for her hand by her side and held it tightly.

“I really hope you know that I’m not mad at you. I don’t know what you’re going through, and I’m sorry I’ve been asking so much of you.”

“I don’t need your pity, Ren.”

Her tone was sharp, but her reaction made it much less painful. He didn’t let go of her hand and tried to tell her through actions that he wasn’t offended. Even if deep down, he couldn’t deny some of the damage her words did to him.

But she sighed heavily, then took a small step closer to him. His heart immediately felt lighter. “I’m sorry.”

His arm wrapped around her back. “I don’t mind. I’d rather you vent to me than kill Akechi.”

He thought he felt her chuckle. “I won’t. My mom just scared me last night and I think it’s all related to my sister. I just want it all to be over.”

“I know everything will be okay,” he whispered into her hair. “Just keep a level head. I will be better about rotating you out when you feel like you need a moment. It’s going to be hard, but we need to be patient. It’s the only way we can really beat Akechi at his own game.”

She exhaled heavily, then straightened her back to wait for the next train. His arm fell from behind her, but he was quick to grab hold of her hand. “He gets under my skin easily right now.”

Ren figured that was why Akechi even joined the team to begin with. To cut them down from the inside out. Makoto was the one person who probably held their team together the best. She knew how to fight, how to think, how to lead. Honestly, Ren thought she was a better leader than he was, and oftentimes listened to her advice in battles. Akechi thought he could ruffle her up and take them all down in the process.

But he wouldn’t. Makoto was better than that. Now Ren had to be

better than that, too. They were up against her sister, and while Haru had been more than willing to fight her share of battles in her father's palace, Makoto was not Haru. Makoto shouldered far too much, thought far too much, expected far too much of herself. Every now and then, he needed to know that and take her out so she could regain composure. And he had failed to do as much the last two times in the Metaverse.

Knowing she was much more comfortable now, Ren decided to change the subject. "Did something happen with your mom?"

He noticed a weak smile on her face, but her eyes lacked much of that happiness that should have accompanied it. "I don't know." When her arm cradled her other one, he braced himself for more. "She had a really bad headache, like the time when she first met you. It almost knocked her unconscious. It scared me, but she says she's fine."

Ren knew what it was like to suffer random headaches at random times. Oddly enough, knowing Minako was her team's wild card made him believe they weren't actually random, but the same weird forces trying to keep her mind and abilities contained. Their first meeting, he was sure that someone was trying to scare him away from her, but thanks to Makoto, that failed. He was curious to know more about the incident, but he didn't want to make Makoto worry any more than she still was.

He thought it best to open up to her. "You know, I get headaches a lot, too. When Ryuji, Ann, and I went to our first celebratory outing, I had one there. I had one when I met your mom. I have them around Akechi from time to time. I have them when I try and think about what happened when I saved that girl back home. But I don't think they're headaches as much as my brain blocking out important information so I can piece everything together."

Makoto turned to give him a confused look, which was cute, given her previous expressions. "You think someone is just blocking your mind to enhance a mystery?"

Ren shrugged his shoulders, trying to keep his smile hidden. "Yeah, I do."

“Who was on TV when your mom got her headache?”

Morgana literally scared him, and Makoto, and both of them took a second to recover. “I-I don’t know. It was an interview, I think. A politician of sorts, if I’m not mistaken. But she didn’t remember anything, or she didn’t tell me.”

“I’d like to think most politicians are liars and cheats,” he said, more under his breath than anything. “I know someone is running for Prime Minister. He’s been all over the news, and any time he starts to speak, Sojiro gets really agitated. He’s also made it very clear that he’s out to capture us and throw us all in prison for the rest of our lives.”

If he hadn’t been looking down at Makoto, he would have missed her reaction. The realization. The clarity. The look of shock followed by anger. When he noticed her taking a deep breath, he leaned down closer to her to keep others from prying.

“You know him, too?”

Her darkened eyes turned to him and he froze in his spot. She sure as hell was intimidating when she wanted to be. Just as quickly as she had glared at him, her eyes dropped to the station floor. “No. It’s nothing.”

It wasn’t nothing, since she practically spit her comment from clenched teeth. Ren just didn’t know if he was better off remaining silent and clueless or curious and have that provoke her into a rage. Sadly for him, he was extremely curious to know where her reaction had come from and what it could possibly mean.

He tried to tread carefully. “Do you know him?”

Ren waited anxiously for her to speak, to move, to flare up in anger. Instead, she inhaled deeply, held that breath, then released it slowly. “H-He’s…I think he’s the one who kidnapped my dad.”

That hadn’t been anything he thought she would say. It caught him so much off guard that he stumbled backwards and hit the pillar right behind him. “What?”

He knew Makoto wouldn't throw someone's name out there without proof, but how would she know that? How did her dad know? He assumed that if someone wanted to kidnap someone else, they would do so discreetly, or they would kill their victim so they wouldn't squeal. Who would force someone to meet with them and let them go…?

A threat.

Threats that would shut them up.

Threats he could follow through on in a split second.

Suddenly, he was reminded of the woman from his hometown. As soon as the memory flashed through his head, he was hit with a ringing sensation he had grown accustomed to. It was something trying to block his memory. He still couldn't remember that man's face, and he was certain now, given everything else he had gone through, that he wasn't supposed to know right now.

It was just extremely frustrating.

"If he's a bad guy, he might have a palace!"

Morgana's voice was soothing in some regards, pulling him out of his haze and back into the current discussion. And while his idea might have been a turning point, Ren also knew they had enough on their plate as it was. Makoto especially didn't need to veer off her goal right now to seek vengeance on someone who may or may not have gone after her father.

Maybe he could tell Mitsuru. See if anything came of it. Keep it between the two of them in case it turned out to be nothing at all.

"We should focus on what we have now," he said, noticing how Makoto was losing herself in her thoughts. "We have to figure out what's going on with Akechi. We need to save your sister. One step at a time."

Makoto, to his surprise, glared angrily at him. "He attacked my father. He's threatened my family. If he has a palace, I want to know."

And now he was tasked with the painful process of calming her down. “If he does have a palace, what are you going to do? How do we know he’s involved with any of this? We need more time to think this out, and in the meantime, your sister could slip further away.”

The mix of conflicting emotions across her face made his heart hurt. “If we took out the tree, we wouldn’t have to pick up the leaves.”

Her words left him confused, and he didn’t have the time to ask her to reiterate before the train began to pull into the station. With the crowds gathering around them, the *last* thing he wanted to talk about was her family and a popular politician no one knew was corrupt.

But, he managed to snag her arm as they boarded. “We can talk about this after school. Akechi wants us to go to the palace this afternoon. Please. Don’t lose yourself over this. We need you to be as sharp as always.”

To his relief, her shoulders dropped with her exhale and she nodded her head. She looked much more tired now, but when she leaned into him, he thought it was a better alternative to her being pissed off. She said nothing as the train took off out of the station. He gripped a hand ring over his head and offered her support with an arm around her back. Not that she needed it in a cramped train car, but it made him feel better. He could tell it calmed her, too.

Once they were walking to the school, Ren felt like Makoto had returned to her composed self. She didn’t seem angry, even if she looked deep in thought from time to time. So, he reached out for her hand, knowing it wasn’t something they did often with students around, hoping to keep her from diving back into the hole that would suffocate her again.

“You’re super cute when you think so seriously.”

And she turned away from him with a blush that made him feel so much better. “S-Stop it…”

With the tension leaving her shoulders, he knew she would be alright. She knew what she needed to do. He knew she wouldn’t barge into another problem when her sister was much more

important for the time being.

Maybe in addition to Makoto learning to be patient, Ren needed to learn not to worry.

They both said their goodbyes (his brought out one last blush before she hurried away) and he was quick to reach his homeroom. They had been relatively late the last few days, between speaking before class and missing trains, and the look in Ann's eyes made him not want to know what *she* thought was the reason for his tardiness.

She asked anyway. "So. Why are *you* so late again today, hmm?"

Ren had yet to come up with a clever response, so he did what he usually did and ignored her as he took his seat. Ann giggled into her hand, then said, "I'm pretty sure Makoto doesn't need a bodyguard taking her to school every day and holding her up."

He grinned back at her. "Maybe she's *my* bodyguard."

"Ryuji did say she threw you over her shoulder one day."

The memory flashed in his mind. He breathed out a laugh to cover up his embarrassment. "Alright. She *is* my bodyguard."

Ann's smile widened. "Dad seems pretty scary if provoked. I can see why you would need her to protect you if you're stealing his daughter away."

They had yet to formally announce their relationship to the team, and at this point, Ren figured everyone knew. Still, it didn't seem fair to tell Ann the truth without Makoto beside him in case she somehow felt differently. "She comes willingly. There's no crime being committed."

" *Sure* ," she added with a roll of her eyes. "At least I know some good stories to tell at your funeral if they ever find your body."

Ren reached into his bag to grab one of his notebooks. "Good thing I don't plan on dying anytime soon."

That was how the conversation ended as the class began shortly

after. His mind was spinning a million thoughts as the minutes ticked by. He wondered how Makoto was fairing, but didn't want to bother her during class in case she really was fine. He also knew she would be upset with him for not paying attention in his own class. They were all going to Sae's palace again that afternoon, and after their conversation that morning, Ren worried Makoto might not be as mentally prepared for the trip. They would go, because Akechi expected them to, but not having her a main part of his party made him very uneasy.

To make things worse, he couldn't find Makoto for lunch. He texted her, asking to meet up, but she replied that she was busy with student council work and needed the time away. It was likely true, and she liked to dive into schoolwork to keep herself busy. Again, he needed to work on worrying less and trusting her more.

He managed to catch her after school. Ryuji and Ann had planned to head over to the courthouse together (which he commented on, much to Ann's surprise) and they would wait for him and Makoto (which Ann gave him a wicked smile before she walked off). The timing was perfect. He could talk to Makoto and promise to sit her out when she was distracted without exposing that weakness to the others who looked up to her. If she wanted to talk more about that morning's conversation, she could.

Makoto was walking out of the student council room when he spotted her. On the outside, she seemed perfectly fine. Like nothing happened that morning. Like her sister wasn't a target. And it scared him. He would rather her be upfront and honest than seething beneath the surface.

Stop worrying.

But, her smile, as weak as it was, helped him to relax. "You don't have to escort me everywhere."

"Maybe I'm concerned you'll spot yourself a nice-looking guy and dump me if I'm not around."

He tried to bring some humor to the situation he thought was growing more and more stiff with every step they took down the hall.

The way she was clutching her bag, the almost too focused breathing, the nagging in the back of his head telling him she had searched for someone's palace once before without telling him…

You need to trust her .

Her laugh even seemed forced. "I think you're plenty fine, Ren."

You need to trust her.

He shrugged his shoulders. "If a queen says I'm pretty fine, I take that as the greatest compliment of all."

He took pride in the fact there was a faint flush to her cheeks, but her eyes were still burning with that resolve that now worried him. She never looked over at him either. Because she knew he would know something was going on…

You need to trust her.

The walk out of the school and to the station was done in horribly awkward silence. His hands fumbled around in his pockets. It was a little chilly that day, so he could use that as an excuse if she asked him why he was acting the way he was. But he worried she wouldn't notice, because she went around him to find out if this Prime Minister had a palace or…

"Are you okay?"

Finally, she made eye contact with him. And he was the one who looked away. "Sorry."

He saw her head drop as she turned to walk into the station. His heart demanded him to pull her back out and tell her why he was acting weird. But if she really was fine and just eager to help her sister, he didn't want to bring back the man who possibly had it out for her dad.

"Ren?"

But at the same time, he needed to be focused and ready himself. He couldn't afford to slip up in the Metaverse with Akechi watching

him. His friends counted on him. And if he wanted Makoto to upfront with him about anything, he had to be willing to do the same.

On impulse, he lifted a hand to the back of his head. “Actually, can I ask you something?”

Her back straightened and her eyes widened. “U-Um, okay?”

“What did you do during lunch?”

The confusion was evident on her face. “Um, I had to work on some council business. This is my last year at school, so I’m trying to help the juniors step up to take my place.”

He wanted to tell her they could never take her place, but that wasn’t the point of the conversation. Yet, she didn’t hesitate like he thought she would have had she been lying to him.

“Why are you asking?”

Her eyes were narrowing slightly, like she knew what he was thinking. He was left with no choice but to ask point-blank. “You didn’t look into that guy from this morning, did you?”

Her reaction was genuine. She fell back in surprise, looked around like she was confused, until the question finally sank in. “You’re asking if I searched his name in the app?”

“Did you?”

His tone was much more sharp than it needed to be. Which she picked up on. Her expression was hard to read, but she seemed more sad than angry. It hurt. “No. You were right. I need to focus on my sister. My dad can take care of himself.”

He felt terrible. Right before she began to turn away from him, he reached out and grabbed her hand. “I’m sorry. I just…I saw how angry you were, and I know you’ve done this in the past, so I…I panicked.”

Makoto said nothing. Her head remained down to her chest. Any trace of a smile was gone. She looked tired and drained, and they

hadn’t even been to the palace yet. “Makoto. I’m sorry. I worry about you, maybe a little too much.”

“It’s okay.” She turned to look back into the station, but she didn’t seem to be all that eager to head off. “You’re right to worry. I really do want to look into him. But I also want to save my sister.”

“I know you do,” he said softly, bravely taking a step closer to her. “I don’t mean to doubt you. And when the time comes, I want to help you find out. Okay?”

“We have to save Sae first.” When she pulled her hand free from his, his heart dropped into his stomach. “Come on. The others are waiting.”

He suddenly wished he could have stayed a victim to his own mind. He would rather suffer from cuts and bruises from the shadows than deal with a stab to his heart because Makoto knew he didn’t trust her.

Chapter 142

Chapter 142

Makoto didn't know whether to be relieved or annoyed that they couldn't proceed further into Sae's palace.

Akechi had been driving her crazy since they had met up at the courthouse. Mostly, he was checking to make sure she was okay, but then he would say things that got under her skin. "Your sister must have a lot of hatred," or "I wonder how much of this is because of her feelings of neglect towards her father," and the big one, "I do hope nothing bad happens to Sae-san. I'd really miss her presence at the office."

Her only saving grace had been that there were shadows to fight or she would have taken her anger out on Akechi again. Ren seemed to be keeping an eye on her, but he never pushed himself into their quiet conversations. He never benched her either, which was good, and she took the time that was given to her to show Akechi what could happen to his face if he kept assaulting her with underhanded comments about her family.

She may have gone overboard. She started to feel like she had torn something in her shoulder, an ever reminder of their first trip to Sae's palace. Her hands hurt. Her mind was struggling to find its traction as the world spun around her. Reaching the roadblock on the next floor allowed her time to catch her breath, steady her heart, and focus once more on investigating instead of raw anger.

Why was she so damn emotional lately?

As they all returned to the courthouse and began saying their farewells, Makoto easily named the cause of her spiraling state of mind: stress. She needed to get to work on applying to colleges. Her sister was in grave danger with every second that ticked by. Eiko had come up to her that day in the student council room begging for a loan for her boyfriend's "clumsy" actions at his work. It gave her too much to think about, which left her little time to eat properly, and

that was why she felt she was worse off than she needed to be.

“You really do look unwell, Sanada-san.”

Makoto shot her head up, eyes glancing around the area for her dad, but turned to find Akechi’s smile widening on his face. Her shoulder burned, telling her she wasn’t in the best of shape to punch his lights out, and there were plenty of people around to see her…

“I thought we were close enough to be less formal, Akechi-kun,” she replied as calmly as she could. The others were standing at the corner to cross the street, and she was slightly upset that Ren had ditched her with someone she wanted to beat within an inch of his life.

Akechi chuckled under his breath. “I do apologize, it’s just that you’ve been quite emotional for a few days.”

Her hands clenched at her side. “She’s my sister.” Then, “And I will do everything I can to protect her. So don’t try and get in my way.”

Fearing she said too much in the heat of the moment, Makoto began making her way towards her friends. However, Akechi grabbed her wrist before she could push past him. “I mean no disrespect. I know all too well what she’s going through. The high expectations. The negativity when you fail to meet them. People who use you to get what they want.”

Makoto took a second to breathe. He was trying to be coy and attack where she was weakest. Her father wasn’t there to help her. She figured Ren was watching her from a distance to keep from escalating the situation. But in that second, her mind began to turn. Akechi knew nothing about her sister. In fact, she was still under the impression Akechi was going to plot something to harm Sae, if not get her in serious trouble. It reminded her that Akechi was the guy in the black mask, regardless of what her dad had told her, and he was extremely dangerous.

It would also mean he worked for the people who were out for her and her family…

The same guy who kidnapped and tried to silence her dad…

Did Akechi and Shido work together? Her gut instinct was telling her they did. Her dad had originally told her that if Akechi was the black mask culprit, someone else was pulling the strings. Someone powerful. Influential. Someone who could commit terrible crimes and remain untouched and make her own father cower for several weeks…

The rage came back into her heart. If she wanted her information on Shido without alarming her family or Ren, she could try and get it from Akechi. Hadn't he tried to do the same when he was investigating the Phantom Thieves?

Maybe it was time to even the playing field, see how well her dad's training had paid off.

"I've heard that the popular candidate for Prime Minister is trying to bring an end to the Phantom Thieves. I'm sure if this mission is successful, he will give you everything you've ever wanted as a reward. He'd be very proud of you."

There was a change in Akechi following her statement. His eyes narrowed at her slightly, but they darkened with unbridled rage. His hand on her wrist tightened to the point it was painful, yet she thought it was an unconscious reaction. All the while, Akechi said nothing, just continued to stare back at her like she had actually punched him in public.

"Everything okay?"

Ren's presence was a godsend. His words cut the tension between her and Akechi like a knife. It snapped Akechi out of his anger, quickly turning to find Ren standing next to her. However, there was no prideful smile or shining eyes that usually accompanied a farewell. Akechi's features hardened again, to the point her now free hand reached out to find one of Ren's.

"Give your father my regards."

Akechi turned on his heel and walked off. Makoto exhaled a shaky

breath, then another, before Ren glanced over at her.

“What happened?”

Makoto was *not* about to tell him. But the longer she remained silent, the more she could tell Ren was growing impatient. “Makoto.”

Her hand reached over to grab her opposite shoulder, looking away slightly ashamed. “I…I may have, upset him…”

“How?”

While she tried to find the best way to explain herself, Ren spoke up first. “He was pretty angry. What did you say to him?”

“I…” She paused, took a deep breath, then started again. “I…I know he’s the bad guy. And that means he knows that Shido guy who kidnapped my dad. All I said to him was that the man running for Prime Minister would be proud of him for bringing an end to the Phantom Thieves.”

She really didn’t think her words would make Akechi so angry, unless it was true, and no one was supposed to know their link. Had that been why Akechi sounded so threatening when he left? Was her sister in even *more* danger now? Was her dad?

She felt sick to her stomach. Whether or not that was because of her fear or anger, she didn’t know. “I’m sorry. But this could be proof that Akechi really is the bad guy and he’s working for Shido.”

Ren sighed heavily next to her. “Makoto, I know you want answers, but you have to be careful. It’s not just Akechi. And someone who could scare your dad like that shouldn’t be taken lightly. You may have just tipped him off.”

Her pride suffering a blow, she grit her teeth and dropped her eyes. “And he may have just tipped *us* off.”

“And what if you’re wrong? What if Akechi reacted that way to throw you off?”

“I’d like to think his anger was very genuine.”

“You’re playing with fire, Makoto.”

“I know how to take care of myself.”

Both of Ren’s hands shot up to his head, his fingers pulling at his hair. “Why are you like this? Do you want something bad to happen to you? Or to your family?”

Why was he being so snappy with her? She may have found a vital clue to solving a puzzle that was plaguing her father. If they could take down the tree, the leaves would stop falling and the world would be safer. Couldn’t he see that?

“I’m sorry that I want answers, Ren. My dad isn’t going to be around forever. I need to prove that I can manage just fine without him.”

He groaned loudly. “You’re so damn stubborn. Don’t you remember what happened with Kaneshiro? Do you want that to happen again?”

“Why are you so upset with me?” Her eyes lifted off the ground to find his, but he refused to look at her.

A minute later, Ren’s arms dropped to his side, his face relaxing with an exhale. “I’m terrified, if I’m being honest. I feel like you think you’re so invincible, that you can do anything, and then you do it, and you realize you can’t. There’s not a lot of people in my life I would fight for, but I’d fight you until you knocked me out to keep you from rushing off to prove a point.”

In her silence, Ren continued. “I didn’t know you very well during Kaneshiro, but I was still scared shitless that day. Your dad wanted me to keep you safe. Your sister wanted me to keep you safe. And how am I supposed to face them if I let anything happen to you because I didn’t stop you from getting into trouble I knew you were getting into?”

While his words cut through her heart, she was still upset over them at the same time. “You don’t trust me.”

His eyes closed, probably thinking of the best way to tell her *no* , but Makoto didn’t need to hear his answer to know it. She also didn’t give him time to respond and rushed off to the corner to catch the

light before she was stuck with him. The ride from the station to Ebisu was a blur, as was the walk to her apartment. The only reason she knew she was home was when she slammed the door too harshly behind her and it brought her mother out of the kitchen.

“Makoto?”

She ignored her and stormed off to her room, shutting her door much softer this time. She dropped her bag by her desk, saw an unread message from Ren on her phone, then threw the phone on her bed.

Again, she blamed the stress for her behavior. Ren not trusting her was just salt on an open wound.

Makoto dropped to her chair by her desk to try and focus her mind on something. College. She could start looking into colleges. The entrance exams would be coming up soon, but she also wondered if taking a year off would do her some good. She could have more time to think. It would be one less burden on her shoulders right now…

Everyone would judge her. The student council president who aced every test in school history wanted to take a year off to rest? What if she lost her chance because her references at school would dislike her choice? Why did she even care at all what people would think of her?

“Makoto?”

She jumped in her chair, turning quickly to find her father slowly entering the room. She was surprised her mom wasn’t the one to check on her, even more surprised he had been home in the first place. It was nice to see him moving well enough to cross her room and sit at the foot of her bed. No crutches. No apparent pain. No limp.

“Are you feeling better?”

Her dad eyed her curiously, since that had clearly not been why he wanted to speak to her. But, he humored her. “I actually go back to

work Monday. I'm sure that will be a lot of fun."

Her heart warmed a degree for the first time all day. "I'm glad to hear that."

He continued to sit and watch her carefully, to the point it grew on her mind and she blurted out, "I'm sorry."

"Why are you sorry?"

She turned around in her seat to stare down at the unopened book on her desk. "For slamming the door."

It didn't take him long to ask, "And why are you slamming doors?"

Makoto really didn't want to tell him about the argument with Ren, the exchange with Akechi, the trip to Sae's palace, her still hurting shoulder. She figured it was a good time to be open with him about her fear of her future. He might have some advice for her about college that she may not have thought about…

"Amamiya is trying to get a hold of you."

It was then that she realized her phone was on her bed, where her dad was sitting, and probably within sight for him to see anything Ren would send her. But when she turned in a panic to make a grab for it, she found it in the outstretched hand of her dad.

"What's going on? Missed calls and ignored texts from your boyfriend aren't like you, Makoto."

He was a cop. Of course he would notice little details. How long had she been zoned out? How long had Ren been trying to contact her? Why did her dad lead with her recently developed problem with Ren over her random burst of anger?

Caught, she knew lying would only dig herself deeper. "I'm upset with him."

When the phone was back in her hands, her dad lowered his hands to his knees. "About?"

“I-I thought you’d be thrilled to hear that.”

His reaction made her heart hurt. “Makoto, if he makes you happy, then I have to accept that. But what you don’t understand is that you’re *not* happy right now.”

She couldn’t tell if he was leading her to come to Ren’s defense or agree with him. She chose to remain silent.

“But whatever you’re so upset about, you can’t let that stop you from being happy.”

Her eyes lifted to meet his. “What?”

A small chuckle filled the silence. “Do you know how many times your mother and I fought growing up? If I let our first fight, or the millions of others that followed, push her away, I don’t know where I’d be today.”

Was he supporting *Ren?* He didn’t even know what happened, but he was urging her to patch things up. Not that she wanted a break from Ren, well, not *really* , she also wanted time to herself. But hearing her father put faith in Ren made her extremely happy.

“You like him?”

He shrugged his shoulders, a small smile still on his face. “No, not really. Does that mean he’s not good for you? No. There’s been a change to you, Makoto, and your mother and I approve. But if he’s hurt you, I’m ready to put my physical well-being to the test right now.”

That brought a laugh out of her. “I don’t think he would be a good match for you unless you were in the Metaverse.”

“So why is he so worried about you?”

While the conversation had been light-hearted for a while, it now took a turn she wasn’t ready for. Her dad would know she was lying. He wouldn’t let her brush the issue off. At the same time, she couldn’t let him know. He would panic and worry over her and probably send someone to follow her around for safety. She

wouldn't have that, especially since he was about to be returning to work.

She thought it would be best to be honest about half of the story. "Akechi being in our party makes things difficult for me." Makoto dropped her head, partially ashamed that she wasn't being truthful. "He makes comments that upset me, and I feel like I'm letting them affect my actions."

"Affect them how?"

Her hands twisted together on her lap. "I…I may be aggressive. I've snapped at him a few times. And…maybe he's starting to know he's getting under my skin."

His sigh left her feeling drained. But at least he seemed to be believing her story. "You can't let him beat you like this. I know it's hard, but take a breath before you react. He's not going to stop, but he'll get disgruntled and possibly make a mistake if he can't shake you up."

"Do you really think he's not the guy with black mask?"

Her dad had been on the fence about Akechi since learning of his persona, but she was curious to know if he was debating it further. Especially now that she *knew* there was a link between Akechi and someone powerful. That someone powerful being the same person who had been targeting her dad. If she could carefully pry information out of Akechi, maybe then she could have the proof she needed to bring to her dad to put an end to this nightmare.

It was the first time in several minutes she looked back up at him. His eyes were down to the floor, narrowed in thought. A part of her wondered if he didn't want to share his thoughts, just like she had done moments ago. She remembered him telling her that she needed to keep an open mind in case Akechi really wasn't the person to focus on. But there was no way. She knew it. She *felt* it. He probably felt the same.

Finally, he answered her. "Do I think he is? Yes. Can I prove that? No. There's more people involved than I can count, so until there's a

confession or concrete evidence, I can't single out Akechi just yet."

"I don't understand," she told him, her voice barely above a whisper. "You know he tried to kill you, yet you think he's not the same person? All because he had a different persona when I saw him?"

He rubbed his face with his hands. It dawned on her then how tired he looked. "He's involved at the least. But I have a hard time understanding his motive, when he came across this power, and if he really killed at such a young age."

It was hard to fathom. Makoto didn't know the exact date the first "mental shutdown" happened, but it was years ago. Akechi was her age. What would have pushed him to kill people in that world without him freaking out first? Was he manipulated? Or forced? And if so, why did he continue to kill instead of seek help?

No. He was doing this for his own reasons. Reasons no one knew about. *Yet* .

"So keep doing what you're doing." Her dad slowly pushed himself off the bed while she remained seated. "Mitsuru and I will keep looking into him. I'm sure coworkers may have something to share. All I ask is that you stay out of trouble, and tell me if Akechi becomes too aggressive."

Makoto nodded once. While it would be nice to catch Akechi slipping up and revealing a dark secret, it was also unlikely. He was incredibly smart. It may be for the best to leave the serious investigative work to her dad and Mitsuru.

It just annoyed her that she *knew* Akechi was working with that politician guy, and she couldn't force him to tell her the truth.

"Don't lose heart, Makoto." His hand landed on the top of her head. She shot her eyes up to look at him, and smiled shyly when she saw his. "Take a break if you need to. Focus on school. Don't burn yourself out this early. Be patient, and this will see itself through."

A pity she was never really good about being patient when the truth was so close to being known. However, his words sparked

something in her. “Then, can I ask you a different question?”

It was getting late, and he was tired, but he didn’t shoot her down. “Of course.”

“U-Um…” She wasn’t someone who liked to ask for advice, since for so long, *she* had been the one handing it out. But at least talking to her dad about college could set her on the right path. “I-I haven’t really been applying to colleges, and I…I worry I won’t have the time, or I’ll force it.”

Technically, she didn’t ask a question, but it felt good to get her problem out in the open. Her dad leaned up against the wall by her desk, arms crossed over his chest, his expression hard to read. “I don’t think you’ll like my answer, because this is something you need to decide on your own.”

She frowned, but he spoke back up. “I took several years off after I graduated high school. While Mitsuru was less than willing to cut me some slack when I decided to go to college, it was hard. But at the same time, I needed that break. So if you need a few months off, take them, then prepare yourself to work that much harder.”

“I just…I know I need to go, but I’m drowning in a million other things.” It was frustrating to admit. She didn’t want to come across as a complainer, and helping her sister was worth all of her time if it helped. But she wanted to be like her dad. She wanted to help people in the future. She wanted to be that strength like he had been when she was down and close to giving up. She couldn’t do that without the education, and the longer she postponed it, the longer it would take her to be *helpful.*

“I think you worry too much, Makoto.” He pushed himself off the wall and gave her another smile. “You’re a brilliant person. You just need to work on showing some patience. Me personally, I think you should apply now. It will be a nice break from worrying about your sister to let us work some details out. The world is always going to be trying to push you down, so you have to fight back.”

It would be easier said than done, but his confidence helped her to narrow her choice down. Sae would always be her priority, but there

was little they could do now but wait. And her dad was right. It would be nice to get out of her head. Afterwards, she may have more energy, more focus, more patience to deal with Akechi.

“Thank you, Dad.”

He dropped his hand back to her head again. “Just remember that I’ve still got some years left in me. I sure as hell don’t want to be working for you when you take over.”

She lifted a hand to her mouth to cover her laugh. “You will always be my favorite partner.”

He chuckled at her. “Then I suggest you study hard, trainee, or I’ll be long gone before you graduate.”

“I will,” she said quietly, more to herself than to him. Her hand instinctively reached for the pendant hidden behind her shirt. “I promise.”

Chapter 143

Chapter 143

Sometimes, Sae wished she never became a prosecutor. It was beginning to take its toll.

She was tired of all the silence in a profession that relied heavily on communication. Annoyed, she had approached her boss about it, asked if there had been any new leads, and why no one was keeping her informed. All he did was wave her off and tell her he was busy.

It struck her as odd, but she had been far too angry over it to stay and demand a better answer.

The silence also allowed her mind to roam freely, which she was starting to see was the worst part. She had ample time to investigate these small, stupid tips that were not extremely important, but burning a hole in the back of her mind. There was only so much she could do, since researching Shido had turned up nothing over a week and she had much the same luck with Akechi. The one person she *could* have investigated was Amamiya, but every time she thought about grabbing her bag and heading out, she thought of her sister.

It was the one time she wanted to text Akihiko and tell him that his precious little girl may have been dating a criminal. He would have taken care of that problem for her and Makoto would be none the wiser. Or, if she was lucky, Makoto would shun her father for intruding on her private life.

But…Makoto deserved to be happy. She would feel terrible if she took a small amount of joy from her sister just to throw Akihiko under the bus. It wasn't worth it.

Her day caught a pleasant break when there was a knock on her door. The secretary popped her head inside, lifted a piece of paper, and stepped in to hand it to Sae. The young lady bowed before she

left, but her attention was now on the memo she had been given.

It was from a defense attorney. He was asking to speak with her. It was cute, because he clearly didn't know her if he was trying to convince her that his client was *innocent.* She recognized the name of the lawyer and quickly found the file on the criminal he was defending. The barely legal young man had been arrested in his connection to Kaneshiro's gang, and that was already more than enough for her to tell the defense attorney to suck it.

Anyone with a connection to Kaneshiro would face life in prison if she could have it. That man came far too close to destroying her sister's life, which in turn affected hers, and with some small amount of guilt, hurt Akihiko. Life in prison was the *minimum* punishment, but death would be far too extreme, even for her to ask for.

The quicker she took care of this new little *gnat* , the quicker she could start working on things that *mattered* . Sae dialed the lawyer's number, waited for the transfer, then cut to the chase as soon as he was on the line.

"I am refusing your offer of a plea deal. Did I not make that perfectly clear to you the first time?"

There was a sigh on the other end of the phone that almost had her hanging up on him. "Niijima-san, hear him out. He's young. Yes, he made a decision that may not have been the best, but he has a name for you. Lower his sentence, and he will give it to you."

Sae couldn't help but laugh. "Please. Lower his sentence because of a name? Who do you take me for?"

"Fair enough." The silence was awkward, like he wanted to say something else, but couldn't? Yet, she was curious to know at the same time, so she waited. "But this isn't *just* a name. This is the same person you've been looking for."

That made her focus more on the conversation. "Oh? With the hundreds of cases I deal with a year, you think that *one* name would be a good enough excuse to offer a deal?"

She thought her sarcasm would have scared him off. It did the opposite. “Cases that deal with your *father* , yes, I believe so.”

Her grip loosened on the phone and she barely managed to catch it before it hit her desk. Finding her voice was not as easy.

“Let me make *you* a deal, Niijima-san,” he said in her place. “Meet with my client today, agree to a new deal, then if nothing comes of this name, you can reverse it. But if the rumors are true, you won’t.”

Sae was beyond thankful that he hung up on her so she was spared the humiliation of not being able to speak. It shouldn’t come as a surprise to her anymore that people *knew* she was Akihiko’s daughter, but to hear it used *against* her like this was a blow to her pride. She was angry for half a second, then she began running through her mental list of criminals who had it out for him *and* was someone she was looking for.

And rumors? What kind of mess did Akihiko bring upon himself now? Was that why he wouldn’t tell her anything? Should she truly be afraid for his life, and her sister’s?

She figured she would at least meet with the boy. It was going to drive her nuts if she continued to think of several people who he could have named without having that proof. Plus, it wasn’t a terrible offer. It just wasn’t something she had done since she had first started her career. If she let one criminal sweet talk her for her *father’s* sake, how many more would come forward and demand leniency?

Now she was angry.

However, after a quick lunch, Sae made her way to the jail to have her chat. She met the lawyer in the lobby of the courthouse, which annoyed her since she never told him she had agreed to his plan. The older man nodded his head at her, then followed behind her in silence. That silence continued between them until they reached the cell where they would be speaking with his client.

The attorney was the one to break it. “Your father is a good man.”

She took her seat at the table and did her best to ignore his comment. “Before I make you any kind of offer, I want to know more about this “name”. I’m not about to hand your client a deal without more information first.”

The lawyer simply nodded his head and leaned back against the wall. But as she waited for the guard to bring in her criminal, her mind wandered. How did this lawyer know Akihiko? And how would he know their relationship? From rumor alone? Or had he purposely tried to find a connection just to get his client a lesser sentence?

Sae had to hand it to him; he did a great job if that was the case.

The question ate her alive until it flew out of her mouth. “You know Sanada?”

She wanted to slap herself for her weakness, but the other man chuckled next to her. “Kind of. I met him once, just because several of my clients mentioned him by name.”

She was tempted to ask him who those clients were, but she bit her tongue this time to keep the question contained.

He continued on, as if knowing she wanted to hear more. “Criminals don’t tend to think highly of policeman. But I guess he’s pretty good with the young ones. Usually gives them a slap on the wrist. Some of them asked for him to speak in their defense in court. Some of them said he was the only person who really cared or gave them a chance.” He chuckled to himself. “You’d be surprised how many of those kids just got trapped in a terrible scenario and he wasn’t there for them a second time.”

Her hands tightened into fists on her lap. Akihiko could treat *criminals* better than his own child? Of course. Because that was *easy* , and his *job.* What was she to him besides his strongminded, steadfast, and vengeful *daughter?* If she had gathered a criminal record, would he have treated her like that, too? Or would he have blown her off because she couldn’t change the fact she was his own flesh and blood?

Thankfully, before she took off back to the safety and comfort of her

own office, the guard opened the cell with a young man at his side. He took the seat across the table, but the first thing she noticed was his appearance. He looked tired, upset, depressed. Normally, she could have looked right past it. Today, it made her more… *sad?*

“I understand you have some information for me.”

Sae thought he would have tried to bribe her first, or he would come across cocky and egotistical. He only nodded his head, then sat back against his seat. “I worked for Kaneshiro for years. It was fun to feel like I was part of a family. I know what I was doing was wrong, but no one understands what it’s like to be neglected by your own family and being accepted by another until it becomes *criminal* .”

Something about his comment struck her hard. She knew all too well what it was like to feel abandoned. The only thing was, she didn’t have another family that took her in. She was left to fend for herself. Regardless, she wouldn’t have turned out a criminal. She knew right from wrong. She knew when she was crossing a line.

Right? “Tell me about this person you wish to hand me.”

The young man’s eyes shot over to his lawyer, who nodded his head. His eyes met hers again. “He was Kaneshiro’s hitman. You arrested one of my brothers a long time ago for stabbing that cop. He was the one who got away.”

If she was remembering correctly, the kid she had arrested stabbed Akihiko in Shibuya. But the one who “got away” was the one who shot at him. And if it was the same man…

She took a deep breath to calm herself. “And is this the same person who caused the scene at the club months ago?”

When the young man nodded his head, Sae fell back in her chair. *This* was the man the lawyer was referring to. He may not have been on her list by name, but now he shot to the top. After all, that man had pointed a gun *at her* in that alleyway, and who had a hand in what happened with her sister months ago. If she knew more about him, she could find out more about Shido, the same person who had kidnapped and terrified Akihiko weeks ago.

“His name.” She slid a piece of paper over to the criminal sitting across from her, but his attorney came to stand behind him.

“Not until you agree to a deal.”

She wrestled with herself for what felt like hours. One deal, that was all it would take to make her look *weak.* But she needed that name. A name could clear up so much, or at least give her some sense of direction. And with a name to hold over Akihiko’s head, she could use it as a bargaining chip for names of the Phantom Thieves.

That was what finally made her accept defeat and cross her arms. A case no one cared about or the case of the century? “I will reduce your sentence to fifteen years with a chance of parole after ten if this name gives me what I want. Given you were never going to see the light of day, I’d say it’s a fair deal.”

Both men agreed, then the young man leaned forward to write a name down on the paper he was given. If she could get a name and a face, it would be all downhill from there. Finally, something was looking up for her.

“Come see me in my office and we will go over the documentation. However,” she added, narrowing her eyes at the man in front of her. “If you’ve lied to me, or this isn’t the same person you described to me, I will revoke your plea deal and add hindering prosecution to your record.”

She was about to reach over and take the paper when there was a click at the door. All three of them turned as the sliding door opened loudly. “There will be no deal.”

It was her boss.

He picked a grand time to show up. Sae was on her feet, suddenly angry for his intrusion. “It’s already been set in motion. In return for a name of a high-ranking criminal, I’ve-,”

“You will do no such thing.”

Sae struggled to understand the anger he was expressing. It wasn’t like she needed his approval to negotiate a plea deal. It wasn’t her

first day, or first year. Just because she didn't make deals often didn't mean he had to intrude on them when she did.

"With all due respect, sir," the lawyer began, taking his place at her side. "Niijima-san has already made the deal. My client has held up his end of the bargain."

The director's eyes narrowed at her and the room felt much colder. Why was he so *angry?* "You are being denied the deal. You had no right to speak to him without my consent."

She tried to keep the bitterness out of her voice. What was so special about *this* criminal that she needed his approval? "This isn't my first day, sir. I'm well within my bounds as prosecutor to initiate-,"

"You will terminate this plea deal, or you will face the consequences of your actions, Niijima-san."

Sae was at a complete loss of words. She couldn't even ask him why he was pissed off about something she had done once before without incident. However, he reached over and grabbed the paper with her name, surprising all in the cell with him. Then, with one final glare, her boss turned to the guard and was let out of the room. The air was still far too dense for her to breathe easy. The shock of his appearance continued to weigh her down. There was no answer for *why,* and it was going to haunt her now more than her current predicament.

But, she had a choice to make. Sae slowly turned to the two other men in the room with her. Both of them waited eagerly for her to say something. If only her boss had shown himself *after* she had the name of her new criminal, then it wouldn't be a difficult decision at all. She'd have her name, and the deal would fall through.

Right?

Why was she suddenly feeling… *pity?* For a criminal?

Her own answer surprised her. "Give me the name of this criminal. Your deal will be finalized. I will handle the director when I return."

The young man at the table didn't seem to be sold on her words, so

she did something else that took her by surprise. Her eyes turned to the attorney, then she said, “Meet me in an hour in my office. Once the paperwork is signed, you can provide me the name.”

“You’re taking a great risk, Niijima-san.”

Was she? It was hard for her to fathom how doing her *job* was an unnecessary risk. Was the director seriously going to reprimand her for cutting a deal? Or had he just shown up to intimidate the criminals at that exact same hour and saw her speaking to one?

No. Something was very wrong about the situation…

Sae shook her head. “I’m just doing my job.”

With that, she grabbed her bag by the table and left the meeting. As she made her way back to her office, she couldn’t get the look her boss had given her out of her mind. It hadn’t been his place to intrude. It hadn’t been his place to cut her down in front of a criminal. It hadn’t been his place to treat her like a *child* when she knew what she was doing.

It terrified her, to be honest. Would he fire her? Would he take cases away from her? Would she have to tell him everything about what she was doing, where she was going, who she was speaking with in the future? Was he jealous, since Shido had approached *her* about a better job than *he* had? Or was this a test of some kind, to see if she would stand up to him?

Or was his well-timed arrival meant to keep her from learning the name of the criminal who had it out for Akihiko?

Oh god…

That was it. Her instincts were screaming at her. He didn’t care about her making a deal; he cared about what she was going to discover. It was strange, because while the director never spoke highly about Akihiko, he always stood on his side most of the time. Well, until recently. But that could have been for a variety of reasons, right? Public opinion. Mounting circumstantial evidence…

Pressure from Shido to keep her on *their* side…

He would see the finalized documentation, but she could at least buy herself some time. She would sign them and agree to the terms. However, she could make the paperwork “disappear” if the name meant nothing to her. After all, she did warn the man what would happen if she found nothing important.

It was the longest hour of her life. She couldn’t sit still. She paced around her office, blinds closed, door locked, her phone turned on silent. She hadn’t felt this way in what felt like years, when she barricaded herself in her apartment after she had defended herself against someone trying to kill her.

It got to the point where she couldn’t *breathe* , so she called the attorney she was supposed to meet, grabbed the file, and threw it into her bag. She wouldn’t meet him in her office. People would notice. She could step out for a few minutes. Use the excuse that she needed some more coffee. She would only bring some back to keep up appearances, but she was too wired and paranoid now to actually drink any and have that *help.*

Fifteen minutes after her phone call, she met with the lawyer at the coffee shop she used to frequent with her mother. As soon as she walked in, she felt so much safer than she had in her own office. She was impressed she didn’t feel sick to her stomach for breaking the rules and heading out in secrecy. It could have been her body reminding her she was doing nothing *wrong* . The aroma of the coffee and freshly baked breads calmed her enough to actually believe that.

Sae caught her acquaintance sitting at a booth away from the windows. She bought herself some coffee, something to hold onto and comfort her, then slid into the booth across from him. Without conversation, she placed the documents on the table, passed them over to him, and watched him sign each one. Not even five minutes later, he pushed them back over to her with a small, folded note on top. Sae put her paperwork back into the folder, then into her bag, but kept the folded note on the table.

“It’s not easy, standing up to your superior like this.”

She brushed his words off and unfolded the paper in front of her.

Finally, after almost two hours, she had her name.

Cheung Ziqiang.

It sounded Chinese, and most criminals who were from foreign countries had dealings with the mafia. She felt fairly confident that this was who was described to her. However, until she could pull up a picture of the man, she couldn't say it was him with certainty.

"I will honor your deal," she finally said, ready to head back to her office and start her investigation. "I will convince the director one way or the other."

His smile shook her up, but his words tore straight through her. "I'm sure your father would be proud of you."

Sae froze in her place, then bolted out of the building. At the crosswalk, she tried to catch her breath. She was doing her job, so why would anyone think that was worthy of praise? And her *father* never cared any other time, so why would he care now? Because the criminal she was rewarded with had a personal vendetta against him? Because in some ways, this could keep him safe?

Please.

It didn't stop her from asking herself if Akihiko really would be proud of her…

She welcomed the distraction of her work when she sat behind her desk again. It may take her some time, but she would hopefully learn more about this Ziqiang character before she called it a day and went home.

That earlier dread sank back into her stomach when she was denied access to her own computer.

She tried again, and again, until she slammed her hands down on the keyboard. In a rage, Sae took off down the hall and banged loudly on her boss's door. The second he allowed her to enter, she got right to the point.

"Did you cut me off from my own network?"

His eyes bore right into hers, but it only fueled her anger. “I told you that you would deal with the consequences if you disobeyed me.”

It was hard to keep herself in check, given he was still her superior. “How am I supposed to do my *job* if I can’t investigate any leads?”

A small smile started to form on his face. It made her heart drop to her stomach. “Any important information you receive, you will hand to me. Your task force will look into any leads I deem worth the time. All you have to do is continue to show up in court, file your paperwork, and report back to me with anything valuable.”

It was a slap to the face. In short, she was being demoted to *in-training.* All because she made *one* deal for a new name? A person whom she had actually been victimized by?

Screw you.

She wouldn’t have it. Sae stormed back out of his office, down the stairs, and back out into the chilly afternoon. He had another thing coming if he thought she wouldn’t find an alternative. With more information, she could use it to her advantage. She could finally close in on Akihiko and get those names she had been dying to have for months. Maybe after she arrested all the Phantom Thieves, her boss would regret ever pulling the floor out from under her.

“Sae?”

Life, however, wasn’t about to let *anything* be easy for her. Of course she would run into Akihiko in the station when he had been invading her mind all damn day. A part of her wanted to ignore him and keep moving. He wouldn’t be able to catch up to her with his injuries. Why was he in Kasumigaseki anyway?

But, he did manage to catch her arm just as she was about to pass through the ticket gate. “Sae.”

She turned to him in a rage. “What do you want?”

It was then she took in his appearance. He was dressed business formal, like he had gone into work or something. He didn’t have crutches, or seem to be held back by the injuries he had been

suffering from for months now. She thought he would have been down and out for weeks after his surgery, but to see him mobile so soon caught her off guard.

He must have been reading her mind. “I went back to work today.”

Wonderful. Now he would go back to pestering her to allow him to help, at a time when everything else was against her…

“You look really tired.”

She almost slapped him. Instead, she crossed her arms and huffed in annoyance. “You’ve lost your damn mind.”

He chuckled weakly. “Sae, you walked through the gate five minutes ago, and then I caught you trying to go back out.”

…Had she really? Her mind had been burning out for several minutes, but she didn’t recall using her pass to go anywhere. Now that she thought about it, she didn’t even know which line she was headed towards.

Why did he always have to catch her at her *worst?* “Just…leave me alone.”

“Sae.” His grip on her arm tightened when she tried to step away from him. “I-I know I don’t have the right to say this to you, but if you need anything, I will help you.”

Don’t you dare.

Her hands balled into fists at her side, clamping her mouth shut to keep her from speaking.

Don’t. You. Dare.

“Sae, please.”

Like a pin poking a balloon, she popped. “My boss demoted me for making a plea deal with a petty criminal so I could learn about a bigger one. He locked me out of my computer. He made me look like an *idiot* in front of a defense attorney and a criminal! I know what

I'm doing! All of this wouldn't be happening if it wasn't for *you!"*

She managed to pull her arm from his hold while he stared back at her in surprise. She was fuming. Her pride was wounded. And Akihiko would have to be the one to push her over the edge.

Again, she didn't make it too far. "Why would he revoke your access over a plea deal?"

Sae didn't want to talk to him anymore. She didn't. She hated him. Everything was his fault. She made the deal to get more information out of him. Had it not been for that, she wouldn't be in the hole she was in now.

So, she rounded on him in another rage. "This is your fault. Had you told me who these Phantom Thieves were months ago, I would have won this case. I wouldn't need to find criminals to investigate so I could use that as leverage to hold over your head!"

Her words came as a shock to Akihiko, which she found amusing. If he really thought she was going to break down and ask for his help without an ulterior motive, he needed a reality check.

"Then make a deal with me."

Now it was her turn to act surprised. "What?"

He looked around the station, then sighed like he was defeated. "I want to prove to you that they are good people. Give me until your warrant is executed. If you feel the same way now as you do then, I will tell you what you want to know. Alright?"

Was he serious? Or was this a well-played trap he had been working on ever since she told him about the warrants? "Are you one of them?"

Akihiko cracked a smile. "I'm not going to tell you anything now. But trust me. They are all innocent. I'll prove it."

Her next question was to ask if Makoto was a part of that group, but she knew she wouldn't get a straight answer from him. She figured there was no harm in accepting his deal, since she could find out the

truth through other means if he *lied* . It just angered her to know he *knew* and he wouldn't say anything *now.*

"Fine," she added with a glare. "It would be my honor to throw all of you behind bars once all of this is over."

"Oh, I think you'll be on our side once all is said and done." He had an arrogance about him that annoyed her greatly. "In the meantime, do you need me to look into someone for you?"

Now she was torn. She couldn't tell him she would do her own investigation when she literally could not. She did think about going to the police station and finding someone there to help her out. Not that she trusted anyone, but most of them were decent people. So long as word never got back to their superiors, who would tell hers, she was fine.

It was just hard to think that rumors wouldn't spread or that she wouldn't get caught. Her next best option would have been Mitsuru, who would have likely relayed the information back to Akihiko, who would have become unbearably protective and frustrating.

She found herself gritting her teeth and telling herself it was the best choice she could make. Reaching into her bag, Sae pulled out the small piece of paper with the name written on it and handed it to him with a stern look.

"Here's *my* deal. I want Mitsuru to look into him. Not you. If you chose to find information about him on your own, you tell her, and *she* can tell me. I don't want to hear anything from you. Do you understand?"

Akihiko frowned at first, then shook his head and took the paper from her hands. "Alright."

With nothing more to say to him, Sae walked down the stairs to the train, heading to the first one departing, not at all caring it was taking her away from her home.

Chapter 144

Chapter 144

“He lives!”

“Someone owes me 500 yen!”

“Damn. I was hoping to get your job!”

“Welcome back, Sanada!”

It was a whirlwind of phrases, sarcastic remarks, and disbelief. Akihiko wouldn’t trade it for anything. Every single person said something to him once they spotted him. Everyone had missed him on some level. The desk clerk on his shift told him that she missed their conversation about good, old fashioned coffee. A few of his police buddies said they missed his leadership, working cases with him, but told him they left him all their paperwork as a punishment.

“I’m glad you really came back,” one of them said before shoving a folder stuffed with papers into his chest. “I was the one who picked the red straw when we had a serious discussion about who would file this shit away if you quit!”

Akihiko was tempted to tell them how close he had come to giving up. He wanted to tell them all *why* he almost gave up. He wanted to ask them to help nail Shido to the cross, to be extra eyes and ears on *his* side, to listen to the truth and fight for justice even if he failed.

He just didn’t have the heart. He had been gone too long to know if they would accept his off the wall theory. Shido had power here while he was gone. He had to tread carefully.

Maybe this was the exact same reason his partner never voiced his thoughts with him…

“This place has been a shithole without you.” One of the younger officers leaned back against a nearby desk and crossed his arms.

“It’s like the higher-ups were more concerned about destroying your work rather than doing their jobs.”

Had someone above him taken his absence as the perfect time to go through his office? Not that he kept anything from them, and his notes on Shido had been left in his room, but still. A sense of paranoia crept into his heart at the thought of what they could have found that he had forgotten about.

“Don’t worry, Sanada,” another officer said as he approached him. “You’re the one we take our orders from. And so help me god the next time you ditch us for this long…”

Akihiko cracked a smile. Being supported even without being present was a huge sign of trust. Maybe he should start opening up to them. They all looked happy to have him back, ready to help him get back up on his feet, and eager to get to work with him.

“Well then,” he started, feeling as though he had been gone for a week and not over a month. “You guys better catch me up or all of this paperwork is going to make me put in my notice for good.”

“You wouldn’t last without us!”

“You’d come back after a week.”

“We’d send the paperwork to you anyway.”

Akihiko smiled to himself as he started the short walk to where his office was. Was it still his? Did someone really go through his things to try and mess him up when he came back? It wouldn’t surprise him, but it would mean that someone was going to be on him like a hawk.

And, like he expected, he didn’t even make it to his desk before he was rudely pushed in and the door promptly slammed behind him.

“Don’t you dare think you’re going to be back for long.”

Akihiko balanced himself and slowly took a deep breath. He gave himself a second to release it, then turned to face the police commissioner. “Oh, trust me, I don’t want to be back for long either.”

He crossed his arms over his chest with a scowl. “One wrong move is all it’s going to take, Sanada. *One.* You so much as *look* at me wrong and I’ll have your ass on the chopping block.”

“Well, if it’s that easy to get sent back home, I guess I’ll start working on an expression to piss you off.”

The commissioner took a step into him. “Shido-san has given me full authority here. And he told me to keep you under surveillance. I would *hate* to have you overstep your boundaries and force your children to pay the price.”

His hands balled up into fists, but he did well not to strike. For now, it was a baseless threat. Most people had to know about his kids by now. Hell, his superiors had known about them before his confrontation with Shido. It hadn’t been the first time, nor would it likely be the last, that they would use Sae and Makoto against him.

“I do have plenty of paperwork to catch up on, so I’ll behave for a few days.” Akihiko turned his back and walked around his desk to take his seat. “After that, however, it just depends. Because Sae and Makoto can take care of themselves. I’d wager good money on them kicking *your* ass.”

The commissioner snarled, then was out the door a moment later. Akihiko took another deep breath. He was back to work. He was ready to see what else was happening in the world. He might be ready to open up to a select few coworkers to help him bring Shido and friends to justice. So, he grabbed the folder that had been given to him and tried to find his rhythm again while trying to ignore his worries about his children.

It was a boring return to work. With him being out for an unknown amount of time, or being told he was never coming back, most of the paperwork was complete and put away, despite what they had all told him. There was really nothing to occupy his time. He spent most of his day catching up with his coworkers. He kept the questions focused on them or the job, doing his best to deflect any interest on his leave of absence. The less they knew about his recent month or two, the better.

He decided to call it an early day. He was tired, and he hadn't expected to put in a full day of work on his first day back. No one seemed to care or mind at all when he left. Most of them wished him a good day, demanded he return in the morning, and it was a welcome change of pace.

Until he ran into Sae at the station.

His heart sank into his stomach when she told him about her boss. One, she was opening up to him, and that made him extremely happy. Two, she was angry, and she had every right to be. He had been under the impression the director was one of those involved in the corruption plot he was uncovering, but revealing that to Sae right then would have been disastrous. It did strengthen his case, though. Especially when she handed him a piece of paper with a name written on it.

"Here's *my* deal. I want Mitsuru to look into him. Not you. If you chose to find information about him on your own, you tell her, and *she* can tell me. I don't want to hear anything from you. Do you understand?"

It hurt that she didn't want him to speak to her, but he knew better than to bite off more than necessary. It was a huge leap of faith for her to give him this chance, and he wouldn't blow it now. He sure as hell would look into this person *with* Mitsuru, but he would allow her to speak to Sae in his stead.

Akihiko made it as far as his apartment complex when he pulled out his phone and called Mitsuru. She would likely be upset with him for diving into *more* problems, but this was for Sae. And her boss had cut her off from looking into this criminal without any real reason. That had to be a huge red flag. His gut sure was telling him that much, anyway.

She picked up on the second ring. "Yes, Akihiko?"

"I need Fuuka to look into someone for me."

Mitsuru sighed into the phone. "We're busy, Akihiko."

He moved on to plan B. “Alright, well, I’ll look into him and pass on the information to you. It’s for Sae. She wants to hear anything I learn from you.”

“Sae spoke to you? Recently?”

“Yeah,” came his reply. “Just half an hour ago. I guess she’s been denied access to her computer at work because she made a deal with someone her boss didn’t approve of?”

It honestly made no sense why the director would act so harshly with Sae. Unless it was to keep someone hidden who was about to be exposed. Maybe that was why Sae didn’t go to the police station. Who would she have trusted there?

Akihiko suddenly felt a wave of relief wash over him. Sae trusted *him* enough with this task because she had nowhere else to go with it. He would not let her down.

“That’s odd.” Mitsuru was quiet for a second, then added, “I thought you were going to keep your distance.”

He stopped outside the building and glared at nothing in particular. “She’s my daughter, Mitsuru. If she needs help, I’m going to help her.”

She was quick to respond back. “We need to stay focused on our plan. Keeping Akechi under our surveillance is only one step.”

He groaned loudly. “So other than monitoring Akechi, what more do you have planned out that you need me to do?”

Akihiko figured they would all sit down and discuss a giant plot together, with the teenagers, but nothing had happened yet. Like Mitsuru had said, Akechi was only one piece to the puzzle. Sadly, he didn’t know much else himself. Time was turning against them. But that didn’t mean he didn’t have time to help Sae.

“We have a lead on the mysterious phone call Akechi received at the culture festival.”

Hearing that made his heart rate pick up. “Y-You do?”

“Fuuka was able to find the number that had called him and traced it back to a source.” She paused. He waited. And waited.

And waited. “Are you going to tell me where it came from?”

Mitsuru was quiet, again, and a minute later, she answered his question. “From the same place Medjed had made themselves known months ago.”

He didn’t know what that meant. Medjed had been some group of hackers that Futaba had claimed to have started before. Why would that have been a lead? And why would Mitsuru sound so pleased about it?

She must have sensed his confusion and chuckled into the phone. “I’m afraid Fuuka could explain it better, but we have Sakura-san trying to find a specific address to pinpoint a culprit. Once she is able to find one, we will have another suspect to question.”

“Um, I’m still lost…”

“The same person, using the same device, brought Medjed to life in the public’s eyes and programed the call to Akechi. If anything, Akihiko, this links Akechi to Medjed, which as we’ve discussed before, pushed Okumura’s name to the top of the list of corrupt adults for the Phantom Thieves to target.”

It all made sense now. If that was the case, then Akechi already *knew* the Phantom Thieves would go after Okumura, so he already *knew* where to strike. All he had to do was follow them in after the calling card was released and do his bidding.

“To make it even more damning, the call was made by a computer, not a phone operated by a human, so the timing could have been scheduled. Akechi’s speech at the culture festival was likely planned to work around the call.”

Akechi knew what he was doing the entire time. He could have easily outed Makoto and the others, but he chose instead to pull them into his own trap. The only question was what was Akechi’s motive *now.* Did he want to set the Phantom Thieves up in Sae’s

palace and kill her, too? Was he going to try and have them arrested beforehand? And if so, why wouldn't he have done so already? He clearly had the evidence he needed…

"Has he been in contact with Shido?" If he had been, then that would help them greatly. It was looking like Akechi had plenty to share about his involvement, but without a confession or better evidence, he couldn't be certain Akechi was the man with the black mask. That connection or communication with Shido would have been a step in the right direction.

"Not yet," Mitsuru said. "But we are monitoring his calls. Fuuka assures me Akechi has no idea his phone has been tampered with. We just need more time. Once we have that proof, we will be able to corner him in Sae's palace and get him to talk."

He just had to hope that the gods were on their side and everything happened within the time limit and everything went well. "Just…keep me updated, okay?"

With a promise from Mitsuru, he was able to feel some sort of hope that everything would be fine. Futaba and Fuuka could do their work and find more information without his help, but he would be more than happy to be there with Mitsuru when they trapped Akechi. It would be so nice to flip the tables on him for once, catch him off guard in the best possible way, and squeeze more details out of the boy.

And Sae would be safe. She would see that Akechi was the bad guy, the real reason for all this chaos, and she would side with him. He could work side by side with his daughter and catch the man he was dying to have in his custody now.

Shido should have put a bullet in his head instead of releasing him. He would soon regret letting him live.

Minako greeted him at the door when he returned home. Her smile also helped strengthen that resolve. She gave him a quick hug and a kiss, then turned to head back into the kitchen where she had come from.

“How was your first day back to work?”

He threw himself on the couch. He wasn’t tired emotionally, but he sure as hell was tired physically. “I was bored all day.”

He heard Minako laugh. “Bored? I figured you would be swamped with a million requests and criminals to talk to.”

Criminals…

Akihiko grabbed his phone, pulled up Fuuka’s number, and uncharacteristically sent her a text. He asked if she would mind looking into someone for him, a Cheung Ziqiang, whenever she could find the time. Meanwhile, he kept the meeting with Sae to himself. If Minako found out and she blabbed to others about it, Sae would be furious with him. It was a small price to pay for her respect.

Now, he just had to play it all off until Fuuka got back to him. “Tomorrow, probably. No one thought I could do much today anyway.”

“Probably for the best, honey.”

It hurt to admit that she was right. The more he sat on the couch, letting the smells of her cooking fill the air around him, the more tired he got. In fact, he was pretty sure he dozed off, and it wasn’t until Makoto came home from school that he felt a second wind of energy.

“How was school?”

Makoto didn’t seem to be surprised to see him home before she was. She removed her bag and placed it at the edge of the couch before sitting down herself. “I’m tired.”

There was a small pang of guilt in his heart, likely knowing the main reason she was worn out, but he wouldn’t pull her down any further. “Maybe we should hit the gym after dinner. Or go for a run around the block. We’ll both sleep great tonight.”

She brightened up at his suggestion. “Really?”

“You’ll have to go easy on me,” he said with a laugh. “I’m getting old, ya know.”

Makoto shook her head. “You can’t use your age as an excuse, Dad.”

He reeled back in mock disappointment. “Oh, c’mon. Pretty sure it’s a crime to beat up on the elderly.”

“Well, someone needs to take his ego down a notch,” Minako chimed in from the kitchen. Then, she came to stand behind where he sat on the couch, dropping her hands to his shoulders. “I get really tired of hearing about his undefeated streak.”

He turned in his seat to look up at her. “When was the last time I talked about that?”

Minako completely ignored him. “If you don’t beat him, Makoto, I’m going to get that lockbox for my sweets and you’ll never get to them again.”

Instead of a jab of her own, Makoto giggled into her hand. “It’s really nice to see you two act like this.”

It was always hard hearing Makoto speak like this. It reminded him that she had been aware of the times things were *not* going well, or when he was reserved and distant. Something as simple as a back and forth with her mother made her happy. It made him happy, too.

Until he felt Minako’s arms wrap around his neck. “All you have to do to win is ask him about our summer trip to Yakushima.” She laughed, likely sensing his reaction. He could not *believe* she brought that damn memory back up. “Then *bam,* right in the stomach. Easy knockout!”

Akihiko pried her arms off of him while she continued to laugh. “Maybe I’ll train her how to pick locks so she can always have access to your stash of sweets.”

“Or you can feel free to gush about your relationship with Ren!”

Now, he rolled his eyes, but he did catch the look Makoto gave her

mother. “I’m sure dinner is almost ready.”

Dinner was an oddly quiet affair. He noticed Makoto had become much more reserved and timid after the comment about her *boyfriend.* He was half tempted to ask why, but he really didn’t want to know. Sadly, he had to realize that Amamiya was a part of Makoto’s life, and if he continued to change the subjects every time he was brought up, Makoto would never tell him anything.

So he did the unthinkable and asked, “How is your relationship with Amamiya?”

Minako almost dropped her chopsticks. Makoto actually did. “W-What?”

Akihiko sighed deeply. “Am I not allowed to know?”

It took Makoto several seconds to regain composure enough to answer his question. “S-Sorry. I just…I didn’t think you would ever ask…”

Another stab to his heart, but he shook it off. “So long as he doesn’t hurt you.” Actually, now that he thought about it, Makoto had been brushing off Amamiya lately. Had she told her mother about it, worried that he would beat the hell out of the boy if she came to him? Or was she overthinking that she had to single-handedly deal with Akechi and it forced her to push people away?

Makoto also remained silent and tried to focus her attention on her meal. Akihiko lifted his eyes to see how Minako was reacting, but she averted his gaze, too. He didn’t want to sound dejected, or throw himself head-first into Makoto’s problems, but it still stung. There was clearly a secret being kept from him.

“I wanted to find out if that guy who kidnapped you had a palace or not.”

Makoto’s voice surprised him. “You…what?”

She kept her eyes down to her meal. “He worries too much about me. Sometimes, it’s annoying. But given that I’ve gone into someone else’s palace behind his back for personal reasons, he thinks I’m

going to do it again."

It took him a few seconds to realize she was talking about Amamiya and why she had been ignoring him a few nights back. Likely. He really didn't believe Akechi was the *only* reason, but he had been too nervous to press her for more details.

"What's wrong with that?" Minako asked, seemingly surprised herself. It struck him as odd, since he figured she had known about what was going on. Maybe he was overthinking a lot, too.

Makoto folded her hands under the table. "He doesn't trust me. Yes, I want to know if he has a palace or not, but he reminded me that Sis has to come first. But whenever I'm not with him, he thinks that's what I'm doing. He thinks I'm going to do something stupid and get hurt. It's…very frustrating."

Minako gave him a look from across the table, her eyes glistening with amusement. He had a feeling he knew what she was trying to say.

She said it word for word. "Sound familiar, Aki?"

He leaned back in his seat and crossed his arms, grateful to have finished most of his meal before having this conversation. "Makoto, you need to understand that people who worry about you to the point it's frustrating probably care deeply about you. I felt the exact same way after your little stunt with Kaneshiro. It took me *weeks* to be able to trust that you were staying out of trouble. But that didn't mean I cared any less for you. If anything, I was terrified that next time you ran off on your own, you weren't going to come back."

Makoto's head fell to her chest, but he had a few more things to say to her. "Some days, I feel like if I would have worried *more* about my friend, to the point *he* snapped at me, he would still be alive. It's hard to find that balance, but don't think his worrying is because he doesn't trust you."

She caught both Akihiko and Minako by surprise when she slammed her fists into the table. "I'm not the same person who charged off into Kaneshiro's club! But it's always the story everyone tells me

when they think I'm getting into trouble. I get it. I messed up. But I learned from my mistakes! Stop using it against me!"

The outburst was very uncharacteristic for her. However, it did let him read her better. This went far beyond Amamiya and his concern for her safety. This was more than Akechi getting under her skin. She was still worried about her sister, but he thought she understood who she was fighting *with.*

"What's this really about, Makoto?"

He watched her take a deep breath, then she dropped her head with her exhale. "I just want to help."

Something cold began forming in his stomach. "What did you do?"

"Aki."

Thankfully, Makoto didn't stay quiet. "I may have pushed Akechi too far…the other day…and that was why Ren got so mad at me…"

Minako spared him a look while he tried to gather his thoughts. How did asking about her relationship end up like this? "What happened?"

He heard a muffled sniffle. He called out to her with a softer tone of voice. "Makoto. It's okay. Just tell me what happened."

She wiped at her face with one hand, but never looked back up. "I just told him that the Prime Minister would be proud of him for bringing an end to the Phantom Thieves. And he got so *angry* . I-I don't know *why…* I just…I just wanted to help you."

"Did he hurt you?"

He released a breath when she shook her head. "No. He didn't say anything. But I've never felt so afraid of him before."

It didn't make sense to him. Why would Akechi get angry over a few words? Makoto hadn't even been direct about calling him out about his association with Shido, so why…

His heart came to a stop. That could very well be what Akechi thought she was doing. If he was right, and Akechi was Shido's bastard, then perhaps that was what Akechi wanted the most from his father. *Recognition* .

Just like Sae…

"All of this has been for nothing, yet I can't give up until I can hear him tell me how proud he is of me."

He thought he was going to be sick. That was it. That missing piece of the puzzle that had been evading him for *months:* Akechi's motive. He was a child who grew up without a father, lost his mother, and would have done anything to be recognized by his own flesh and blood. That was why he was so close to Sae. That was why he was trying to kill *him* .

"Dad?"

Akihiko snapped out of his thoughts and found both Minako and Makoto eyeing with concern. "Are you okay?"

He promised Minako he would be truthful with her, but he couldn't. Not yet. He couldn't prove anything right now. But he would. Because he was *right.*

"Sorry," he finally said. "Maybe I'm more tired than I thought."

He should have found a better excuse. Now, Makoto likely thought he wouldn't be able to do anything with her after dinner. Minako didn't seem to buy his pitiful excuse anyway.

"W-Will you at least take a walk with me, Dad?"

He sure as hell wasn't about to tell her no, or say he had a serious connection to find proof of, so he nodded his head and pushed himself to his feet. "I think that would save me from having to suffer defeat, yeah?"

A small smile came to Makoto's face, and he was suddenly feeling so much better.

The feeling, sadly, didn't last too long. As soon as they were both outside, the silence suffocated him. It was never hard to talk to his daughter about anything, but after their conversation at dinner, he didn't know how to start one. His mind was also in need of a distraction.

"Do you…" Makoto stopped speaking, attempted to start again, then shook her head. "Do you think…I'm always looking for trouble?"

Instead of answering her question, he laughed to himself. "You're a lot like me, you know? No matter how many times Mitsuru tried to lock me inside the dorm, I always found a way to sneak out."

He thought he heard her chuckle. "She did tell me you were a troublemaker."

"And I'm not about to deny it." They rounded a corner. "And while I can understand and respect why you think the way you do, I'll never forget how I felt when Amamiya told me that you had been kidnapped by Kaneshiro. I…I honestly thought I was never going to see you again."

Makoto dropped her head, but he wrapped an arm around her shoulders. Having her close to him helped calm that terror seizing his heart at the memory. "And honestly, Makoto, I don't think you'll ever understand why we worry so much about you until something happens to someone you love."

"I-I guess…"

"And maybe you just need to tell Amamiya this. That way, he will at least know how you're feeling."

They turned another corner before Makoto broke the silence. "You know, I get really nervous when I talk about Ren with you around. I worry that I offend you sometimes, b-because h-he's my b-boyfriend!"

He found her reaction funny, but didn't comment on it.

"But then you can say things like this without judgment or being biased because I'm your daughter." She came to a stop, then turned

her head to look over at him. “Thank you, Dad.”

He dropped a hand to the top of her head. “I don’t ever want you to feel afraid to talk to me. About anything. Your future. School. *Him.* Your happiness means everything to me, even if that means I have to set *you* straight. I know you’d do the same for me.”

She straightened her back and saluted him with a big smile. “Yes, sir!”

“Now,” he said, turning back to face the road. “Last one home has to admit defeat. In front of your mother. Ready?”

Makoto jumped into place next to him. “I’ll be waiting with Mom when you come crawling back inside.”

He may not have won the race, but he sure as hell slept great that night.

Chapter 145

Chapter 145

Sleep wouldn't come to her no matter how hard she tried.

Her mind was racing, thinking about the day's events. Sae still couldn't believe her boss had come down her throat about speaking to a criminal without his consent. And then that very same day life slapped her across the face, she runs into Akihiko? Was this some sort of sick joke fate was playing with her? She clearly wasn't laughing.

However, she was curious if Akihiko had learned anything about Kaneshiro's supposed hitman. He told her that he would leave it to Mitsuru to talk to her, yet she doubted he would really leave something like this to an old friend. In fact, Sae figured this criminal wouldn't be all that terrifying if Akihiko never directly spoke to her about him. She might even be offended.

When the first rays of sun began breaking through her window, she decided she had much to do, and it was too late to fall asleep now. There was one matter of business that she needed to tend to, and bright and early in the morning was the perfect chance to do that. As she got ready to head out, she began brewing her first cup of coffee. It was such a shame that she wasn't welcome enough to wait in Leblanc to have another cup.

After all, her morning mission was to have a long-awaited chat with Amamiya. Sae was pretty sure Sakura would kick her out before she even had a chance to ask to speak to the boy. But, it needed to be done. Amamiya knew Kamoshida, Kaneshiro, Isshiki's daughter, and was pulled into the safety net of good company after Okumura's death.

She also wanted to ask him what business he had being so *friendly* with her sister. Makoto deserved better, if they were dating. That thought alone made her *sick.*

It was early, and she was exhausted, but she took off towards Yongen-Jaya after her coffee was finished. She knew she would have to find more caffeine before she made it into work, but as she wasn't really allowed to *work,* she could take her time. Maybe pop in Leblanc *after* she spoke to Amamiya. She would have to be at the courthouse by late morning to prep for her afternoon trial, but she also knew the boy needed to go to school. That gave her plenty of time for a chat, more coffee, and getting her paperwork in order.

Sae took the first train out of the station. It was nice, because it was quiet, there was hardly anyone up, and she had plenty of space to herself. Crowded trains usually annoyed her, so this was a nice change of pace.

The only part that sucked about being up so early was now she would have to wait several hours for Amamiya to leave the comfort of his home. She doubted he would be up and heading to school when she arrived at the station, but she didn't know enough about his routine to know when he would head out. She would also look suspicious if she lingered without any stores to shop at or any real reason to be around.

It would be a blessing if the boy was one of those students who managed to make it on time to school by half a second. She didn't want to hold him up and make him noticeably late. Makoto would see that, and ask him why, and that was the last thing she needed right now.

Maybe she should have waited another few days.

No.

If she didn't talk to him *now,* she wouldn't talk to him at all. If Amamiya was taking his time, she would go to him. If he was *still* late to school, she could threaten him with jail time if he whined to her sister.

An hour after she arrived at the station and bought two cans of coffee from the vending machines, Sae hit the jackpot. Amamiya was a good little boy who liked to be on time for school and took into consideration the rush hour and had a pillow of time so he wasn't

late.

Assuming he didn't beat around the bush with her, he wouldn't have a reason to be tardy today either.

"Amamiya."

The boy looked up from his phone, not expecting to be called out first thing in the morning, but then she saw the panic. His back straightened. He looked more alert, or scared. He practically stopped breathing.

She held up a hand to keep him from excusing himself from the conversation. "I would assume you would like to talk here and not back at the police station."

He swallowed hard, then dropped his eyes to the floor. "O-Okay?"

"I'll make this quick." She nodded over to a small section of the station that seemed fairly secluded, then got right to business. "I want you to tell me about your assault charge."

If she could hear his story, she could do a number of things. One, she could learn some of his mannerisms so she could tell when he could be lying or telling the truth. Two, she could create a small bond between them, so he would be more open with her. Three, she could learn more about *him,* if he could have been one of the Phantom Thieves, and if he was worthy to be friends with her sister.

In retrospect, she should have asked him long before she allowed him to walk Makoto home from school. At the time, her sister's trust had been enough. But not now. Not with one man dead and more than one *coincidence* hanging over his head.

"Can I ask what this is about?"

Sae was about to tell him that he could not, but she knew that would scare him off and into saying something to Makoto. "Consider it a favor to my sister."

His eyes widened at that, then he lowered his head again. "I really do appreciate it, but I've kind of accepted it. There's not a lot anyone

can do about it now."

… *Not* how she was expecting this to go. "Then you should have no problem telling me why a small-town ruffian was shipped off to Tokyo as punishment when he should have spent the night behind bars like most teenagers do."

There was a faint noise, which she thought could have been an animal of some kind, but she shook it off. It wasn't important. Amamiya's reaction was all she needed. He exhaled deeply, then slowly nodded his head.

"I was walking home one night and I heard someone crying out for help. There was a man trying to pull a woman into his car, so I went over to them to try and help. A lot of it's still a blur, but I tried to pull him off of her, he was drunk, and he fell over and hit his head. I'm sure the police report tells you how the rest of that story went."

To be honest, Sae didn't think this small and lanky kid could beat up anyone. Maybe if he was in a rage, or on drugs, but that was it. His story seemed more likely, given his clean record up until then, his current size, and the fact that he was far from intimidating. It made no sense why he was arrested at all. There was even a witness…

"The woman turned on me, if that's what you're about to ask," he added with a shrug of his shoulders. "I was kinda mad at first, but now, I think she was terrified that man would do something to her."

"Who did you save her from then?"

There had been no name in his file. She was hoping he would have one, or a decent description of the man…

Wait…

She hadn't stopped him to take his story seriously. But then that hit her. Because she was suddenly invested in finding out who had been involved. One witness who lied. One man who was spineless and couldn't even claim he had tripped over a rock. He had to blame a good Samaritan, a *child.*

Amamiya shrugged his shoulders again. "I don't know. Any time I try

and think about it, I hear this weird ringing noise. I just assumed it was too traumatic of a night and I've forgotten some details."

Sae almost took him at his word, but she knew the opposite was true, too. Some people who suffered traumatic events remembered *too much* . It was a damn shame that she didn't think Amamiya was lying to her.

"I really do appreciate people listening to my story," he said with a light bow of his head. "I guess if it helps protect other people in the future, it's not so bad."

Amamiya bowed once more, then lifted his bag higher onto his shoulders. Before he could walk off to the train, she grabbed his arm. "Are you one of the Phantom Thieves?"

She stared him down and tried to analyze his reaction. From what she could gather about him from previous encounters, he wasn't all that talkative. He kept to himself. He didn't seem to be interested in conversations in general. In fact, the only reason she thought he opened up to her had been because Makoto was her sister.

So when he chuckled at her, she didn't know what to think. "I wish I was. Then maybe I could help save even more people."

Sae let him walk off only because she didn't know how to stop him. Did he really think the Phantom Thieves were *good?* Most people thought they were terrorists now, so to say something so *brazen* to her…

She groaned under her breath. Maybe he wasn't one of them. Maybe he was just a fan, or knew them, or had been saved by them like Makoto had been.

Something didn't feel right. He couldn't have been evil. Makoto would have picked up on something by now. Akihiko would have never stood up for him to the extent he had. He didn't appear to be causing any trouble in school last she checked. So why did she feel like he *was* one of them…

If he really was, and he really was innocent and a decent kid,

wouldn't that make that group *good?* Akihiko's words from the day before suddenly flooded her mind. He told her that he would prove to her that they were good people. She may not have known Amamiya like her sister did, but Sae wouldn't stoop so low to call him *bad.*

They killed Okumura.

Not that there weren't thousands of other people who wanted Okumura dead.

Sae shook her head to clear her thoughts. When she was done at trial, she was going home, taking a long, hot shower, and going to sleep. Her lack of rest was beginning to affect her sense of reasoning.

The rest of the morning passed without her being aware it was getting later. The only reason she knew the time was when her stomach grumbled. Not that she was a big eater, but she ate enough to get by. Years ago, she ate well enough to go with a workout routine that she had regrettably kept alive from high school. Those days at the gym were becoming rare over the past year, and she could all but hear Akihiko's voice in the back of her head.

"You'd feel a lot better if you stopped laying around your room and got back into a routine again."

Groaning in annoyance at the memory, Sae pushed herself to her feet. A quick meal would benefit her and keep her stomach quiet during the trial. People around her were paying her no mind for the time being, but she would make a bet that would change and rumors would start fresh if she were starving herself…

The last thing she wanted was for her boss to use her own health against her and put her on suspension.

An hour later, after a stop by the nearest convenience store and another cup of coffee from the corner café she frequented with her mother, Sae was ready for the afternoon. The coffee helped to perk her up, to get her mind out of the mud that had been from her five minute chat with Amamiya that morning. Her typical curry bun filled

her with energy and determination. She would prove to any criminal she was a force to be reckoned with. She would prove it to everyone in the courtroom. She would prove that she wasn't afraid, that she *could* do her job, and that she didn't need anyone to hold her up when she was at her breaking point.

But when she walked into the courtroom and took her seat that afternoon, something felt…off. A slight migraine came and went. The air felt stiff and hot. She had been at the prosecutor's table a number of times and had never felt like this. The pressure was similar to when someone was watching her. Someone who shouldn't be there. And it brought a sense of anxiety into her heart. And given the fact her boss was furious with her, she assumed the feeling was related to that…

Naturally, her eyes scanned the courtroom seats, hoping to pinpoint a possible source. As soon as she did, her blood ran cold. Her heart dropped into her stomach. Her voice was caught in the back of her throat.

For the first time in her career, Makoto sat in the audience. She didn't look eager and excited, or even *say* anything to her beforehand like Sae figured she would have on her first visit to the courthouse. Instead, there was a knowing look in her eyes, almost like she had come with a purpose. Granted the man that was on trial was someone Makoto may have remembered from her incident with Kaneshiro, the *last* place Sae wanted her to be was in the same room as him, again.

Or had Amamiya squealed and mentioned their meeting that morning? She knew she should have threatened him…

But then something else hit her even harder. Makoto smiled at her softly, a subtle *"You can do it, Sis!"* like she would say before any match she had as a teenager. However, Sae was far from relieved or eager to impress. A case that should be one of the easiest to prosecute suddenly became the hardest for her. Makoto would be watching her every move, listening to her every word. She had to be *perfect* . She couldn't mess up. She couldn't *lose.*

At the same time, what would her sister think of her if she got carried

away like she always did? What would Makoto say if she snapped at her victim and threw him in prison before he could defend himself? But what would the *world* think of her if she didn't act like the Sae Niijima that struck fear into the hearts of men because she tried to impress her sister?

Why was Makoto there at all? Didn't she have student council business to tend to?

Luck was on her side that afternoon. The man pleaded guilty with no contest and was quickly ushered back into the hallway he had arrived in. She felt silly for getting so worked up, knowing that the guilty plea was already set in stone, but Makoto's presence shut her brain down. Which got her thinking about why Makoto had bothered to show up at all when it was over in a snap…

Sae wasted no time. As soon as the gavel slammed the hardwood benchtop, she was on her feet and making a mad dash to where her sister was sitting in the gallery. No one seemed to mind, but if they found her behavior bizarre, she didn't notice.

"What are you doing here?"

Makoto was somewhat surprised herself, but when she shook her head, it was gone. "I was just curious to see how you worked."

Thank god. "It's dangerous here." Her eyes narrowed. "I've told you that."

"I-I know…" Makoto lowered her eyes, wiping her hands on her skirt before standing up from her seat. "But I…I think I want to pursue a degree in law. I thought this experience would be good for me."

Sae had never once asked Makoto what she wanted to do in college, but hearing her say she wanted to follow after her made her heart clench in her chest. She didn't want this life for her sister. All the hatred, the anger, the extreme lows that never came with rewards. Makoto could do so much better.

It just wasn't her place to tell her what to do. "You're serious?"

The childish expression Sae thought she would have seen when she

spotted Makoto in the room was now showing on her face. “I do. I see how hard you work. I see the good that Dad does for the people. So one day, I want to lead like he has. I want to have the spirit you have when you fight for justice.”

She sounded so determined. Sae wanted to be just as excited for her, finding her path in life on her own, but she wasn’t. “Why don’t you become a teacher, or an engineer?”

The look on Makoto’s face had Sae immediately regretting her words. “You don’t think I would be any good?”

A hand cradled her head, preparing to nurse another random headache. “Makoto, this is a stressful job. There’s a reason I don’t speak to you about it, as I’m sure there’s a reason Akihiko doesn’t speak to you about his work.”

“He takes me out from time to time to shadow him.”

Sae’s vision faded for a few seconds. “What?”

Makoto must have sensed the change in the atmosphere around them and took a step back. “Um, n-nothing. B-But I really want to do this.”

Akihiko was *training* Makoto to be a cop? There was a bitterness on her tongue that she couldn’t get rid of. Because of that, her tone was laced with much of that resentment. “He takes you out to *train* you?”

Makoto’s eyes closed with her exhale. “Yes. I’m helping out a friend who’s in trouble with a man she’s in a relationship with. He works at a club in Kabukicho. I went on my own and he caught me. In order to keep me out of trouble, he said he would go with me to help.”

Sae didn’t know what she hated more; Makoto’s story or the fact she was so blatantly honest with her. She couldn’t find her voice before Makoto spoke back up. “I’m learning a lot from him, but I know there’s more to the law than what he can show me on the streets. Which is why I wanted to see you work.”

It was far too late for her to try and make this trip about *her* . If that were the case, Makoto didn’t need to mention Akihiko and his never-

ending desire to spoil *her* . Because of course Akihiko would want Makoto to follow after him, to keep her in his shadow, to keep her close by so he could dote on her like the precious daughter she was to him…

“Don’t ever come back here, do you understand me?”

She practically spit at her sister as she turned on her heels and stormed off. She didn’t care who saw her, what they were saying in hushed whispers. She was furious. If she saw Akihiko one more time, she would hang him on the spot. How *dare* he keep trying to reason with her when he only cared about Makoto…

“Someone is in a rush today.”

The only reason Sae turned was to fire off a snappy retort, but then she saw Akechi standing in front of her with a grin forming on his face. The first question out of her mouth was, “Where have you been?”

His smile widened. “Miss me already?”

He never failed to push her buttons. “Not at all. It’s been oddly quiet around the office and it’s nice. I enjoy being able to work in peace.” When he laughed to himself, she asked, “So why are you here?”

“I’m actually waiting for your sister. We came here together.”

The admission made her recoil in surprise. “What?”

And that damn smile of his never went away. “She approached me about wanting to visit you in court. I made the arrangements, and as a gentleman, I figured I would walk her here to make sure she was safe.”

“Makoto *let* you take her here?”

Akechi nodded slowly. “Is that a problem? I feel much better suited for her escort than the criminal she hangs out with.”

Sae had known Akechi for a while, long enough to know he was fishing for something. She just didn’t know what. “I assume you’re

referring to Amamiya?"

"I am," he said sternly. "With all due respect, I don't think he's a positive influence."

She chuckled beneath her breath. "Are you trying to tell me *you* would be a better friend?"

"I just worry, is all." His eyes dropped and his smile finally disappeared. "Between dealing with a criminal friend and a criminal father, I'm sure her life needs some light."

Before she knew what she was doing, Sae reached out and grabbed a fistful of his shirt. Once she yanked him into her face, she gave him the nastiest scowl she could muster. "Don't you *ever* think she's a criminal. Makoto has a level head and knows what she wants. You keep yourself out of her life if she tells you to or I'll make sure you never see the light of day again, understand?"

She threw Akechi back, then walked back into the courtroom she had left moments ago. Spotting her sister, Sae took three steps to stand next to her, catching Makoto's attention immediately. "I'm taking you home. You will not leave with Akechi."

How in the world did Makoto think Akechi was safe to be around? If Akihiko could tell *her* to be careful around the teen, then he had to have told Makoto as well. Did Akihiko know Makoto was alone with him? Or was Akechi full of himself and only told her that to get under her skin?

"Y-You'll take me home?"

Was it that much of a shock? Well, she couldn't hold it against her. Sae did snap at her only moments before to stay away from the courthouse. But she was her sister. Sometimes, it was hard to remember that. "I am. Now, let's go."

Makoto finished her conversation with one of the clerks, then she followed after Sae out of the building. She was content to take Makoto home in silence, but as soon as they were far enough away from crowds, her sister caught her attention.

“Do you believe Akechi’s a bad guy?”

It was a question she sadly didn’t have an answer to. Did she? Maybe. He sure had some explaining to do about a million topics. And as much as she hated Akihiko, he didn’t have a history of being *wrong.* Regardless, Akechi had another thing coming if he thought he could use her sister as a means of shaking her up.

“I don’t want you around him alone.” She didn’t stop walking towards the station, leaving Makoto to rush to catch up to her again. There was a moment of silence, but she could tell Makoto wanted to say something else.

Finally, she did. “You…you really believe Dad then.”

This time, Sae came to a complete stop. Her first instinct was to slap Makoto across the face and warn her to never speak of her father again. But she didn’t really *ask* as much as she made a statement. That was what bothered her and kept her from finding her voice.

Makoto sighed next to her. “I know you don’t get along, but he really does worry about you all the time. But he’s going to protect you. And I think you know that.”

She was tired of the conflicting emotions that were stirring in her heart more often than not as of recently. She hated Akihiko, but trusted him at the same time. She was annoyed that her sister had the courage to keep her back straight when Sae was beginning to feel like she was slipping away herself. If she could go back in time and actually have that relationship with her father, would she be as miserable as she was now, or would she be living the dream life she thought she was shooting for?

Why all of the sudden did she *care?*

“Stay strong, Sis,” she heard Makoto whisper, almost like it wasn’t meant to be heard. “We’re going to save you.”

Sae wanted to tell her that she didn’t need saved, but she kept her comment to herself. “Just focus on your future, Makoto. After all, I’m sure working side-by-side with my little sister would make the world

a safer place.”

The brightness in Makoto’s eyes brought a smile to her face. At a loss for words, Makoto only nodded her head, then turned to keep walking ahead beside her.

Sae just never told her sister that she wouldn’t wish this hell on someone she loved so dearly.

Chapter 146

Chapter 146

When he realized that they had been lied to about completing a “simple” maze for the first high stakes mission, Ren immediately worried about Makoto.

It was pitch black, and no one could see anything once the door shut behind the team.

She was already on edge. It had been a miracle that Akechi had yet to speak to her on their way to Sae’s palace that afternoon, but the day was still young. Akechi tended to say something to rile Makoto up when no one was around. The darkness would be a perfect place to do that.

Plus, Makoto was afraid of the dark. The first time he had noticed her fear had been back when a storm had shut off power at Sojiro’s house after sneaking in to check on Futaba. And Ren would *never* forget that day as long as he lived. Her grip on his leg and his arm would forever be tattooed in his subconscious.

Hell, the memory was already making him grow warm, and he had a serious mission to focus on. He was grateful no one could see his face flush right then.

However, it wasn’t a surprise when he felt a small and light grip on his hand before he took another step. He knew Makoto was standing next to him without having to look over at her, but she was still keeping a safe distance between them. Almost like she had stepped up to him to discuss a strategy.

“We’ll be okay,” he heard her whisper. “R-Right…?”

He wanted to tell her she was being cute, but he felt Akechi come up to stand on his other side before he could answer. “Do you have a plan of action for the maze, since it seems we’ve been tricked?”

Akechi likely knew Makoto was afraid and would jump the second she was away from him. Ren would do everything he could to keep her at his side. Other than that, he had no real plan. “We all stay together. I want you, Skull, Panther, and Mona bringing up the rear in case we are met with an ambush.”

It was a pretty good idea in case they were separated as well. Ryuji could bash his way out of trouble and be loud and reckless enough Ren would know where to find him. Ann’s fire blazes would be a form of light. Morgana could help navigate. Having Akechi go with them would not only give him the illusion Ren trusted him, but keep him away from Makoto.

That and Futaba could keep her eyes on Akechi.

He heard Akechi chuckle next to him. “I see nothing wrong with your strategy. I should have expected nothing less.”

And if anyone wanted to pummel the life out of Akechi and make a scene about it, Ryuji would be more than happy to oblige. “I’m glad that I’m living up to your expectations.”

The chuckle that came from Akechi was more sinister than his previous one, but he said nothing in response. It made Ren’s blood run cold. He wrapped his hand around Makoto’s and gave it a quick squeeze, hoping to comfort her on some level if she had taken Akechi’s laugh similarly.

“Well, let’s be off,” he finally said, turning to face Makoto fully for the first time. “Are you going to be alright?”

He could make out her silhouette as she looked away. “Um, y-yes.”

It brought a smile to his face. “I’ll be right here. I won’t let anything happen to you, okay?”

She sighed in the darkness. “T-Thank you…”

It was a breath of fresh air, knowing she was comfortable with him after she stormed off the other day. Whether or not she was just holding onto him because she was scared and that trumped her slight animosity towards him, he didn’t know. He liked to think that

anyway. She had been pretty distant that morning, that afternoon, right until they stepped into the darkness.

They could talk afterwards. Right now, she needed him, and he refused to lose that respect.

About five minutes into the maze, his anxiety was getting the better of him. He had no idea where he was going, how much farther they had to travel, where the enemies were waiting for them. He had no idea where Akechi was, if he was following his command, or what he was thinking about in the silence. He had to keep Makoto safe from her fear and any ambush, as well as his friends…

They rounded a corner and Ren heaved a sigh of relief. A few meters away, there was a shadow, glowing with a red aura. He pushed himself against a wall before the enemy could see or sense him, holding out an arm to stop the rest of his team. No one questioned his sudden stop, but he could feel the anticipation in all of them.

To his luck, and mild disbelief, the red glowing monster began to make its way to where they were all waiting. Once it was close enough, Ren took the lead and jumped out from behind the corner to begin the attack.

A few minutes later, it was over, the enemies disappearing into the darkness.

And Ren worried he had made a mistake.

He had lost track of Makoto after the fight. While he knew she was involved, she wasn't next to him. They usually didn't stand side by side in a battle, thinking it wise to spread out their strengths and healing abilities and sharp eyes for commands. He always took one side; Makoto took the other. Thanks to that, once the darkness swallowed them up again, she was gone.

With Akechi around, he couldn't call out to her or push through just to find her. His friends wouldn't have minded, and would have been able to help, but Akechi was already working his claws into their team bonds, his relationship with Makoto, Makoto herself…

The next battle, he would be more cautious. For now, he had to push on and hope for the best. After all, Makoto could handle Akechi on her own, and if she was at a breaking point, Ren was sure he wouldn't need a light to find her. Akechi might not have a face when he found them, but he would accept that fate if it came to that.

However, the next battle came, and his worry turned into panic. Akechi was not in the party. Makoto was nowhere to be seen. Morgana and Haru were also missing. Ren would have had no idea when they could have been separated, but as his eyes tried to find shadows of his missing friends in the glowing red that surrounded them, Futaba came up right behind him.

"They're all together. I can sense them, but they must have taken a different turn than we did." She was quick to return her attention to the fight, but added, "Don't worry. Mona is with them. He'll find us."

Her words were little comfort to him, but he had to focus on the fight. He refused to let his friends take the brunt of the battle just because he was worried about someone who could take care of herself.

But this was the perfect chance for Akechi to get under her skin. In the darkness. Without him there to notice when she was about to lash out.

Hopefully, Haru and Morgana would keep her in check, or better yet, keep Akechi in check.

Ren gave all the credit to Yusuke, Ann, and Ryuji for fighting all the shadows they came across. He barely gave orders. He barely had the state of mind to pull out a persona that would have been better suited for the enemy. To make it worse, Ann came up to him after defeating an enemy and before the light faded told him it was all going to be okay.

His emotions were showing for the first time, and he hated himself for it. Ann patted his arm gently, a silent reminder that she didn't judge him for being distracted.

Morgana never led his group back to the others. Ren couldn't turn around and look for them. Futaba didn't have an exact location,

since she had a slight fear of the dark as well and it was hard for her to concentrate.

Ren suddenly felt so much worse. He had to get his team out of there. He had no idea how much farther they had to go, how many more enemies they would run into, how much longer his friends would last with the growing nervousness and concern.

He missed Makoto's presence greatly. He didn't realize until that very moment how much of a mental support she was. He was worried about her yes, but he was slipping himself. If he was slipping without someone else there to lead, he was letting his team down. Someone would get hurt. He would make a vital mistake. They would *lose* …

"I think we are close you guys!"

Futaba gave him hope, but then he remembered they were missing half their team. Ryuji hollered loudly. Ann cheered with him. Yusuke hummed in relief or excitement, he couldn't tell. He only wished he could have felt the same.

Please be okay…

Another few twists and turns and battles later, his team finally reached the exit. Yusuke and Ryuji literally barreled through the door and the light blinded him momentarily. Ann came to stand next to him, her hand resting on top of his shoulder.

"Don't worry, Joker. They'll be okay."

"I think they're coming from a different direction," Futaba whispered as she took a step closer to the door. "They should be rounding a corner and heading our way soon."

The dread settling in his stomach began to ease into something more bearable. It would be too much of a scene if he grabbed Makoto and checked her for injury or told her he was sorry for not thinking his strategy through and hold her and never let her go because he was scared himself…

"They're coming!"

A second later, the sound of footsteps and idle chitchat made Ren freeze in his spot. He couldn't rush over to them because Akechi would *love* to see how worried he was. But when the light from their exit highlighted Haru and Makoto walking side by side, seemingly fine, with Akechi and Morgana a distance behind them, the breath left his lungs in a mad rush.

They were okay. At least, they seemed okay. Haru wore her usual brilliant smile. Makoto looked normal. Akechi nodded at him. Morgana approached him with a grin. "Looks like we did just fine!"

Ren would have rather asked Makoto that, but they were safe right now. That was all that mattered to him. Once they were heading home and away from prying eyes, he could check on Makoto and see if things were *really* fine.

For the time being, all was well.

He should have known that was only the beginning of their trial.

"Well, well. This is a surprise."

Ren's heart dropped back into his stomach as the reunited group stood in the middle of an expansive hallway. No one took a step forward to face their new "enemy", but in the confusion, he tried to throw himself into the front of the group.

Something was wrong.

A friendly face was blocking their final exit. And Ren assumed that wasn't *coincidental.*

He held up an arm when he sensed Makoto take a step up. "M-Mom?"

The figure before them resembled Minako perfectly, but the feeling he was having led him to believe it was a trap. It would make sense to see her in her daughter's subconscious, just as Haru had to face her creepy fiancé. It was just unexpected. And after the stress of the darkened maze, the *last* thing he wanted Makoto to face was her own mother…

But the confusion on Minako's face seemed genuine. "M-Makoto?"

Ren had to literally grab Makoto's wrist to keep her where she was. "What are you doing here?"

Akechi took the moment to stand on his other side. "Something is very wrong here."

However, instead of the happy and cheerful expression the Minako *he* knew would wear, she lowered her head and laughed softly to herself. "I see. Akihiko thinks he can send you to hurt your sister since the coward can't kill her himself."

Makoto recoiled at the tone, making Ren fully step in front of her, his free hand inching closer to his mask. "It's not her. We need to prepare to fight."

Beside him, Akechi seemed to agree, lifting his hand as well. "It seems Sae-san has a bond with her mother at least. That would explain why we have yet to encounter her father."

"No!" Makoto tried to free herself from his grip, but thankfully, Haru realized what was happening and took a hold of her other hand. "I'm not going to hurt Sis! And Dad loves her! Why would you think he would send me to kill her?!"

Ren had seen Makoto angry before and had been intimidated of the burning red eyes once in the past. But when Minako lifted her head, the eyes that stared back at them were out for blood. It made his heart grow cold. His lungs struggled to pull in air. All he could do was hold his breath and focus carefully on her movements.

Her eyes were literally glowing, similarly to the aura given off by the shadows in the maze. He heard quiet gasps behind him. His fingers brushed his mask on reflex.

"You've long since abandoned your family, Makoto. You made your choice to forgive the bastard that destroyed my daughter's life, who destroyed *my* life! You will *never* get close to her as long as there is breath in my body! I will prove to Sae that I love her over those who wish her dead!"

The figure before them grabbed at their head and Ren knew what was happening. He turned to face the rest of the group. “Prepare yourselves!”

They were all hesitant in their agreement, but just as the monster took its final form, Haru gave him a look, then literally pulled Makoto away from the others. Ren caught the look in Makoto’s eyes, terrified and lost and *broken.* While he anticipated something to this degree happening, it was easier to *think* it and *prepare* for it than it was to actually witness.

“I will kill you all!”

Akechi was the first person to launch an attack, and Ren was sadly thankful for it. The others may have only met Minako once or twice, but they liked her. They sure as hell didn’t feel comfortable right now summoning their personas and willpower to *hurt* her. But they had to. They had to push past this subconscious bond to save Makoto’s sister.

So Akechi leading the charge was appreciated. But Ren knew he wasn’t about to sit idle while Akechi did all the work. Not with something so personal.

The monster before them was something new, and it looked straight out of some kind of nightmare. The wheel of fire at least was a giveaway to its weakness, but the eyes of the purple clad shadow still tore right through him. A part of him wondered if this had been Minako’s main persona, or one of them. The red, the fire, the desire to *protect* , it all manifested before him, yet reminded him so much of the person he had come to respect.

Akechi’s attack did little to nothing. To their surprise, Yusuke’s ice attacks did little to nothing. The eyes continued to stare at him as each of his teammates tried their own special attacks to find a weakness. Ren was positive the intensity of the glare was going to haunt him for the rest of his life.

Maybe it’s trying to challenge you, to see where your loyalties lie…

Since Akechi had taken over the light element, Ren figured the last

option was either Makoto's strength (but she had yet to leave Haru's hold, and he didn't anticipate her fighting in her state), or curse attacks. The eyes never left him, absorbing attacks, evading attacks, firing back with attacks of its own.

It may not have been Minako, but Ren couldn't help but think he had a point to prove to her. He loved Makoto, and he knew her family situation well enough to know that Makoto was doing all she could for what was right. He *had* to defeat this shadow, not only for the good of their plan, for Makoto's sister, but to show Makoto herself that he would stand beside her. He supported her.

A strategy to go with his resolve, Ren touched his mask and called out to one of his personas. "Anubis."

For a split second, he saw the persona across from him narrow its red eyes, almost as if it was angry with him for daring to fight back. *"I will protect my daughter with my life. You will not defeat me."*

He barely managed to evade a blast of fire that shot out at him, but once he was stable on his feet again, his eyes met with the red ones. "Now!"

The mental communication between him and his persona happened in a second. A slew of daggers pierced their mark, and a moment later, there was nothing. No glaring eyes. No hateful scream. No retaliating attack.

Ren remained ready to strike again in case the attack had failed, but the enemy disappeared into the air once the darkness had subsided. He let out a breath, helping to relieve his muscles of the tension that had built up, then turned to face the others.

"We should probably get out of here as soon as we can," he told them, feeling weakened by the events of the afternoon. It wasn't much, and they had all fought longer and harder before, but facing a life-like version of Minako had drained him of energy. Plus, Makoto needed to rest. She hadn't tried to fight the shadow. She had been caught with Akechi in the darkness for so long. They had made decent progress for the day.

Yusuke and Akechi both walked farther down the hall, ensuring that there were no more surprises or enemies waiting to attack. He took the free moment to check on Makoto. Haru saw him approaching, but the small frown on her face made him stop in his place.

Not only had he abandoned Makoto in the darkness with Akechi, he had used that darkness to strike against a figure of her mother. Haru must have sensed his hesitation, offering him a weak smile instead, then patted his arm before leaving him standing in front of Makoto.

It was the hardest question he had ever asked in his life. “Are you okay?”

Makoto kept her head down, but she didn’t appear to be shaking or tense or anything really. It was hard to know how to speak to her, or if she would slap him if he reached out and touched her, but he had to do something.

He lifted her head with a hand under her chin. Her eyes were dull compared to the intense glare of her mother’s, but they were dry. There was still some amount of life to them. Whether or not that was her *forcing* to keep herself together, he didn’t want to know.

“Are you okay?”

When she nodded her head immediately, he knew she was lying. Her eyes fell from his and her posture gave her mental state away before her voice did. “I’m fine.”

A part of him worried that she was angry, but too tired to fight with him. Another part worried she was at that breaking point, and one wrong move would push her over the edge, and he would never get her back. But another part of him was hopeful that maybe she really was okay, and she just needed to absorb the surprise.

He didn’t hold his breath, but he had reminded himself that he worried far too much about her and that had caused their recent quarrel. Maybe she was still holding that over his head.

So, he made a grab for her hand, gave it a light squeeze, and smiled at her. “Well, it’s been a long day. I know Skull said he needed to

head home a little early to grab some stuff for his mom."

Again, Makoto only nodded her head, her expression never changing, but he couldn't read her eyes thanks to the angle of her mask. Maybe she was just really tired…

Ren didn't push her anymore, but he remained by her side as they followed behind the others to the exit to claim their reward. Makoto kept up with him, even if she was quiet. She never pulled her hand from his, but she never held on to him as tightly as she would in the past. It was hard to focus on the scene happening around him when his brain was thinking of ways to reach the girl standing silent next to him.

She was suffering; he could sense it. He just didn't know if there was another wall around her that he thought he had broken down weeks ago. If he pressed her, would she snap at him like she had earlier? If he said nothing, would she slip further away?

He blinked and they were standing at the entrance of the palace, ready to head home. He could still feel Makoto's hand in his, but he was desperate to hear her voice again. The rest of his team appeared to be more reserved as well, likely shaken up by the turn of events in the palace.

And then there was Akechi. "It truly is a shame we couldn't continue on. I fear we are losing time to-,"

"I am so sorry, Akechi-kun," Haru interjected, her head lowered and hands together at her waist. "This is my fault. I have an important meeting with my family, and I'm afraid I told them I would be available this evening."

Ren didn't know if Haru was telling the truth, but her words did the trick. Not only did it convince Akechi that tonight wasn't a good night to continue, it kept Makoto from lashing out like she typically did.

"My apologies." Akechi bowed to her respectably. "I didn't mean to make light of your situation. I should put more trust in all of you."

Yeah, you should…

No one really said much else as they walked together to the train station, then said their goodbyes as they headed their separate ways. Again, Ren only spoke to Makoto when Akechi was out of sight. “Do you want me to take you home?”

He hoped he didn’t come across desperate, but she had been very quiet after seeing the shadow figure of her mother in Sae’s palace. There had been no light to her eyes, her face, her body language. He almost would rather have her livid and threatening Akechi than this version he saw of her now.

“You don’t have to.”

At least she spoke to him. “I want to.”

His heart did a flip in his chest when she gently nodded her head, and he was quick to reclaim her hand as he followed behind her. The silence between them was uncomfortable, but Ren didn’t know what to say to her. He couldn’t congratulate her performance in the palace since she was either too shook up to fight or away from him. He didn’t want to ask her how the maze had gone for her group, too terrified that something had gone wrong and it would create more distance.

He chose instead to remain quiet. If she wanted to start a conversation, he would talk then. Until that point in time, he would suffer in the silence. Sometimes, words were better left unspoken, and he had spoken perhaps a little too much at the wrong time in the past…

“You don’t have to take me the rest of the way.”

They had just stepped off the train in Shibuya, and Makoto took a step out of his reach. He was quick to catch up to her, as the trains weren’t packed with people and the platform hadn’t been overly busy. “Wait…”

She did stop for him, which he was grateful, but when she turned to face him, his heart snapped in his chest. She was hurting, and trying to be strong about it, and he knew he would never be able to live with himself if he didn’t try and talk to her now.

“I know things have been stressful lately, and today was a push in the wrong direction, but it’s going to be okay. We’re going to save your sister. We’re going to figure out what’s going on with Akechi. We just need to keep fighting right now.”

Her head fell to her chest, likely to cover up any tears forming in her eyes, but he couldn’t get his feet to move to stand beside her. “I-I know. I just…I-I think I…I want to be alone…for tonight.”

No. He wouldn’t allow it. She was going through so much and she needed to know he would be there for her. “I don’t want you to be alone right now. I don’t care if we walk around and you say nothing to me. I want to be there.”

The slight frown to her face made his heart clench in his chest. “I want to be alone, Ren.”

She was putting a wall between them again. She was trying to avoid talking about her feelings. She was trying to be something she didn’t need to be around him. “At least let me take you home.”

“I don’t want to go home.”

“Then let me at least be a witness to Akechi’s murder, okay? Maybe I can help you evade the police.”

He shouldn’t have tried to make a joke when she was so close to falling apart, but to his absolute surprise, there was a light chuckle from her. “I don’t plan on killing him.”

Ren took the chance to step closer to her, carefully draping one arm around her shoulders. “That’s a shame. I already cancelled all my plans tonight so I could see the final showdown between the two of you.”

His hold on her tightened when she leaned her head against his chest. He wanted to freeze time then, so it was just the two of them, no drama, no problems, no nothing but the peace he figured would only last another moment. And it didn’t last too much longer. He felt her hand grip at the front of his shirt, then her other hand did much the same.

Her voice is what broke his heart clean in two. “I-I’m sorry…”

Both of his arms wrapped around her. She was fighting hard to keep herself composed in a public place, and Ren was more than willing to leave the open space of the platform to allow her the freedom to release all of her pent-up emotions. He knew there wasn’t a lot of time, if she wasn’t already crying by now, so all he did was move around a pillar at the end of the platform to keep as many eyes away from them as possible.

Not that the passengers ever cared about anyone else…

And Makoto unleashed a flurry of concerns the moment he was still again. “I’m so scared. What if my mom really hates me? Or my dad? And my sister can’t be saved? I can’t keep everything together. I want to protect everyone, but I’m weak. I can’t even handle the darkness. I can’t face a fake version of my mother. I can’t face the reality that Sis thinks I hate her because I love my dad. I don’t want to lose her. I don’t want to lose anyone. Why can’t I be stronger?”

One hand found its way into her hair to try and calm her down. She was borderline hysterical, and he cursed under his own breath for not noticing her frustrations sooner. Not only that, but he sure as hell aided in some of that, worrying over her excessively until she was forced to push him away. He had no reason to believe she would run off and do her own thing when her family was fighting so hard to get their daughter back.

Maybe his accusations had been the tipping point. The maze and the battle afterwards had just been salt in an open wound.

“I’m sorry I came down on you the other day,” he started softly. “You mean so much to me, to the team, to those at school. I know you love your sister, and she means everything to you. I know you’re going to overcome this like you do everything else. And if that’s not true strength, then I don’t know what is.”

Makoto didn’t say anything back to him, keeping her face pressed into his chest to silence her cries. He continued to hold her against him, kissing the top of her head every so often, hoping to let her know he would always be there for her.

When he figured she had calmed down enough, he kissed the crown of her head once more before gently separating from her. “I love you, Makoto.” She wiped at her eyes, then he grabbed one of her hands in his. “And I will do everything in my power to help you see this through.”

And he would do anything, even put his own life on the line, to bring her the peace she deserved.

Chapter 147

Chapter 147

She had no idea what was happening that day.

Akihiko had come home in a state of shock, maybe excitement or anxiety, but he wasn't really able to put his emotions into words. He took his seat on the couch, his mind clearly somewhere else, so she thought it best to let him sit and relax while she got dinner ready.

Then, Makoto came home, head down, eyes somewhat red, trying to push herself further into the wall so she didn't have to talk. When Minako asked her what was wrong, Makoto shook her head, told her she was fine, then bolted to her room.

She actually ended up burning dinner that night, trying to figure out what was wrong with Akihiko and Makoto and failing to get answers.

Mitsuru was her saving grace. Akihiko apparently had half a mind to tell *her* why he was acting so bizarre, and she was more than willing to pick up something to replace Minako's disaster before she arrived. In the meantime, Minako found herself sitting across from Akihiko, a new book in hand, trying to open him up with a look.

When he sighed loudly, she lifted the pages higher to block the smile that spread across her face. "I know, I know. I'm keeping secrets again."

"You made me burn dinner," she replied, lowering her book to glance at him. "I don't do that very often. I take pride in what I do, you know."

He threw his head back into the couch, his hands resting on his knees. "I just…I asked Fuuka to look into someone for me yesterday. Instead of a response, Mitsuru tells me they're coming over." He chuckled nervously. "Can't say I'm not feeling extremely anxious right now."

Her heart came to a stop. “Who did they look up?”

She could always tell when Akihiko was trying to figure out a way to beat around the bush. It was frustrating, especially since he told her he would *stop* that. He at least seemed to read her expression correctly, and he sighed heavily as he leaned back on the couch.

“Some guy that people are trying to keep us from investigating.”

“Akihiko.”

He changed his tune real quick after she called him by his full name. “I don’t know. I was asked to look into someone, I asked Fuuka to do some digging, and now I’m worried that I’m going to get my ass chewed out over it.”

There was still something he wasn’t telling her. “And who are you doing favors for that you don’t even know what you’re getting into?”

The way he fell silent made her want to reach across the room and strangle him. She shut her book loudly, annoyed, and tossed a heated glare over at him.

She opened her mouth to remind him of his promise when he held up a hand to stop her. “Sae asked me to look into him.”

Minako was so taken back that she laughed. *Sae* had gone out of *her* way to ask a favor of her father? Without a motive? There was no way. “And what did you give her in return?”

Akihiko shook his head lightly. “Nothing.” When she watched him rub the side of his head with his fingers, she held her breath. “I caught her at the station after work my first day back. That was when she told me that her access to her computer had been revoked because her boss didn’t appreciate her making a deal with some forgettable criminal. So, she asked me to look into the name this criminal gave to her.”

She couldn’t believe it. She was angry that Sae’s boss took drastic measures when she was just doing her job. Another part of her worried that maybe Sae *didn’t* tell the full truth to Akihiko and took advantage of his love for her. After all, hadn’t she had plans to

accept this new job offer from a man who was at the top of the criminal ladder? Surely she could make a complaint to Shido about her boss and have the man lose his job.

Right?

“I know what you’re thinking, Minako.” Akihiko held her eyes with a serious look on his face. “The reason Sae asked this of me was because she was able to put it together. She knows that her boss acted out of line, but she knows he did it for a reason. She *knows* that whoever we are investigating now could blow this corruption scheme wide open. *That* was why she asked. Because no matter how she presents herself, she still has a good heart.”

She wanted to argue back with him, to remind him that Sae was losing her mind and she only thought about herself. To think that way about her own child cut straight through her heart, but it was the way Akihiko spoke that made her believe him. If he trusted Sae, even after all she had done to him, she had to trust in Sae, too.

“What’s going on with Makoto?”

Minako literally jumped in her seat, causing her book to fall from her hands. Akihiko gave her a curious look, but she only sighed as she reached out to grab the book off the floor. “I don’t know. She wasn’t very talkative, but I didn’t push her very hard.”

“She’s been acting like this for a few days now.” His tone hardened, and she knew he was going to start prying about the day he left and her and Makoto had a mother-daughter chat. “What did you two talk about that night?”

At least he didn’t pull any punches and got right to it. However, she chuckled, rolled her eyes, and returned her focus to her book. “It’s mother-daughter bonding. I can have them, you know.”

Whether or not Akihiko was content with her response, she didn’t care. She knew her daughter would *murder* her if she let slip the specific details of *that* conversation.

It still made her a little sick, to be honest.

However, it didn't explain Makoto's behavior after she had returned home that day. Had she tried talking to Ren about *sleeping* with him, and nothing came of it? There had been a sense of urgency in her voice that day they spoke on the matter, and Makoto was never one to air on the side of caution. What if that had blown up in her face? Or what if she *did* heed her advice and Ren did not?

"I'll talk to her after dinner," Minako finally said, sensing the uneasiness building between the two of them. "Mitsuru said she would be here soon, and I'm sure Makoto will feel more open to talk after she eats something."

They left it at that; Akihiko turning his attention to his phone and she flipped a page in her book. But now, the image of Makoto being hurt by Ren, physically or emotionally, was clouding her mind. There was no way. Ren was a good kid. He would *never* hurt her daughter. It had to have been some sort of misunderstanding, or something completely unrelated.

Still, she wouldn't know until she asked, and she would rather do that while Akihiko was preoccupied.

The knock on the door was the start that her brain needed. Akihiko was the first one to push himself to his feet to answer it, then he shot a look over to her. "We also need to talk about our current progress with the plot to trap Akechi. Makoto will have some excellent insight. So try and calm her down and I'll get Mitsuru settled in."

It was a touching sentiment. Akihiko wasn't one to *not* know what was happening with Makoto, and the fact he trusted her to get to the bottom of their daughter's emotional state, it warmed her heart. She gave him a simple nod before she came to her feet as well.

Minako paused in front of Makoto's door. She took a breath, trying to remind herself that Makoto had to be the one to talk to her. If she said something wrong, Makoto would clam up, or take a turn for the worse.

A few seconds later, Minako knocked softly on her door, then carefully cracked the door open. She expected Makoto to be sitting at her desk, immersed in homework or something related to school.

Or sitting on her bed glued to her phone…

But she found Makoto on the floor, her back pressed up against her bed, knees to her chest, and something clutched in her hold.

It took several more seconds to let the sight wash over her. But when it did, Minako was quick to cross the room and drop to her knees next to her daughter. “Makoto?”

Her head didn’t lift up. Her posture didn’t change. Minako felt her heart beat a little too fast in her chest. “Honey, what’s wrong?”

Makoto was quiet, not moving or showing an indication she had heard her. When Minako was about to try again, she heard a weak voice. “D-Do you hate me?”

Her first reaction was to laugh. “Why would you think that?”

Again, she was about to add something about stealing too many desserts from her, but she could have sworn she heard a sniffle. It made her remark get caught in her throat. It was far more serious than what she thought, and now she was desperate to know why Makoto would think something like that.

“I saw you today. In Sis’s palace. You were so angry with me and Dad. You kept saying we destroyed your life. A-And I know it wasn’t *you* , b-but…”

Her arms draped around Makoto’s shoulders and pulled her into her. She really had no idea what Makoto saw, if it was something similar to when she had gone to face her father, but why would she be so *terrible* in Sae’s palace? Did Sae really think Minako thought that way? Or worse yet, was that weak bond between the two of them some sort of protection from those who wanted to hurt her? Did Sae think that she would protect her from the bad guys? And if so, why wasn’t she? In fact, Minako was the one who sent them after her…

Regardless… “No, honey, I don’t hate you. I don’t hate your sister. I sometimes hate myself, for what I’ve brought onto both of you. But I love you both so much.”

Her heart started to crack when Makoto leaned into her and her

shoulders started to shake. “I-I’m just so scared. I couldn’t even face you. I can’t keep my head straight while I’m in her palace with Akechi. I don’t want to face whatever else we have to in order to save Sis. I-I don’t think I can…”

Minako was at a loss of words. She was slightly bitter with herself, angry that she hadn’t noticed the signs of Makoto cracking so she could have done something earlier. She had so much to shoulder and everyone expected her to succeed. With the exception of her outburst the other day, Minako thought that Makoto was doing a wonderful job keeping herself together.

Maybe Akihiko had caught the signs. Maybe that was why he tried to distract her from time to time. Maybe Ren had tried to do the same. But Makoto was her daughter. Smart, strong, and able like her father, but reserved and determined like her. And Minako knew how dangerous the pressure could be after so long.

“I know we tell you all the time that you’re not alone, but maybe it’s wrong of us to keep piling on the pressure and expectations.” She squeezed Makoto tightly. “And I’m sorry I haven’t been as helpful as I need to be. If there’s anything I can do to help you, please let me know. Even if I have to follow you into Sae’s palace, I will.”

She felt Makoto shake her head. “I-I don’t think Dad would like that.”

Minako placed a kiss to the top of her head. “Well, then don’t tell your dad.”

At least Makoto seemed to be calming down the longer they spoke. “Dad would come and find you.”

“Nah,” she added with a chuckle. “He’d just be super mad when we got home. He’d probably ground both of us, but he’ll get over it.”

Makoto slowly pulled away from her, then lifted her eyes to meet hers. “Thank you, Mom. But I’d rather not get in trouble. Dad can be pretty scary…”

Minako narrowed her eyes as best she could. “And you don’t think I can strike fear in your dad?”

There was a smile forming on Makoto's face that sent a wave of relief through her system. That was when she caught what Makoto was holding onto. She wasn't surprised it was one of her many Buchimaru plushies. Anytime Makoto was upset or afraid, she clutched one of them in her hands until she found comfort in either her, Akihiko, or Sae. It also reminded her that Makoto was still her baby, a child that needed her when life wasn't the kindest, a child that relied on her strength when she couldn't find it herself.

"I mean it, Makoto," she said, hugging Makoto one more time. "I will do everything I can to make anything better for you."

Minako released her, earning a much more genuine smile from Makoto. "I actually feel better now, talking to you about this. And I'm sorry for getting so worked up over words I should have known were not true."

She dropped a hand to Makoto's shoulder. "Maybe I need to do a better job at telling you how proud I am of you and how much I love you."

Makoto opened her mouth to reply, but there was a soft knock on the door that had her up on her feet instead. Minako was half as quick to stand up, but by the time she was on her feet, Makoto was standing in front of her father at the door.

"S-Sorry!"

"What's going on?"

Minako smiled as she came up behind Makoto, placing another hand to her shoulder. "Oh, Makoto doesn't think I can intimidate you, so I'm plotting to prove her wrong."

"M-Mom!"

Poor Akihiko gave both of them a look, but remained confused as he slowly took a step back. "Um, okay?"

"I guess it's pretty rude to keep Mitsuru waiting after she was so kind to provide dinner for us since *you* had to make me ruin it." She chuckled lightly, finding Akihiko's reaction adorably priceless, then

laughed as he rolled his eyes and walked off without them.

She, in turn, glanced back down to her daughter. “See? He might strike fear in any boy you bring home, but I can strike fear in *him* just as easily.”

Makoto sighed, her lips turning upwards slightly. “I never said you *couldn’t.”*

They both followed after Akihiko and met with Mitsuru and Fuuka in the living room. Fuuka greeted them happily, like she always did. Mitsuru had already taken a seat on a couch across from where Akihiko had sat. She appeared to be looking over some notes, whether hers or Akihiko’s, and Minako thought it best not to disturb her. Akihiko seemed more anxious; Mitsuru more focused. Had she told him anything yet?

Mitsuru’s glare a second later forced Akihiko to still in his seat. Minako was sure then that Mitsuru was angry and had not revealed anything to him. Yet.

“I’m so happy to know you burned your dinner, Minako,” Fuuka said with a laugh. “It means that I got to pick what to have, and I *never* get that chance!”

Minako waved her hand as Fuuka continued to treasure the rare moment of someone else destroying food. But, it wasn’t all that terrible of an ordeal, seeing as though Fuuka had chosen to be more unhealthy than Akihiko would ever let her cook. So while her pride may have taken a stab, her stomach was more appreciative.

“You know me so well,” Minako chuckled, opening a container of fried chicken. “It’s been so long since I’ve been able to eat what my heart desires.”

She could practically hear the disgust on Akihiko’s face. “It’s going to kill you one day.”

Fuuka giggled into her hand while Minako took a bite of her meal to spite him. “I’ll die happy and full.”

Sadly, the joking atmosphere didn’t last much longer. Makoto took

the seat next to her father, a plate of food in her hands. Fuuka sat beside Mitsuru. Minako finally sat down next to Makoto. “So. Why is there so much tension here?”

Fuuka lowered her head slightly, but Mitsuru shot another glare to Akihiko. “Are you *trying* to get yourself killed?”

Akihiko groaned loudly next to her. “You always act like I’m *eager* to die. So why don’t you stop holding back what you’ve found and-,”

“Do you recognize this man, Akihiko?”

Minako watched in uncomfortable silence as Mitsuru handed him a photo of someone, likely the same person Sae had asked him to look up. However, once he was staring down at the picture, his face paled like he had seen a ghost.

“D-Dad?”

He fell back against the couch, letting the photo slip from his hands. Across from them, Mitsuru folded her arms. “Aside from me wanting to beat the life out of you, this has also turned up valuable information.”

She had to interrupt before her curiosity killed her. “Who is this?”

Mitsuru looked back over to Akihiko. Minako placed a hand on his arm when his face fell into his hands. The room was terrifyingly quiet. Any one of them could have cut the tension with a knife.

“Aki…”

“This is the same man that cornered me that night in Shibuya when I was stabbed. He was the same person who shot me in the leg at Kaneshiro’s club. It’s the same person who followed Sae around and held me at gunpoint to lead me to Shido…”

Minako and Makoto both gasped loudly. Her hand on his arm fell to his side for a second, then she placed it on his leg. “W-What does this mean? D-Did Sae know this…?”

Mitsuru shook her head. “We don’t know, but I will be talking to her

about what we've learned soon." Then, she opened up the folder in front of her on the table. "He's a dangerous criminal. He has ties to the Chinese and Russian mafia, and he's a wanted man in three different countries. He runs an illegal weapons trade between China and Japan. He kidnaps women and children in the Philippines and brings them here to serve the highest bidder. He is a well-known and feared assassin in eastern Asia. Your work in Kabukicho was a blow to his business. However, this confirms that there's a link between Kaneshiro and Shido."

Fuuka nodded. "I looked further into it, and it appears that Shido was using the money Kaneshiro was earning to fund his political campaign." She pulled out her phone and studied it intently for another second. "In fact, I was able to trace some of the money to some other politicians and government officials who had been chosen to replace those who had vacated their position."

Minako had no idea what was happening, but Akihiko looked like his mind was racing to put things together. "Do you think that when the Phantom Thieves took down Kaneshiro, Shido started planning a way to eliminate them?"

The room fell silent once again. Mitsuru was the one to speak first. "It's likely."

"Then why didn't they kill Kaneshiro?" Makoto's tone made her jump in her seat. "He could have easily told police who he was working with in his confession."

"I don't think they were prepared, if I'm being honest." Mitsuru pulled her hand to her chin and began thinking out loud. "The only reason I believe they killed Okumura was because they *knew* where you and your friends would be. They didn't have the time to set your team up for Kaneshiro. Medjed was likely a rouse to buy them some time. They didn't know exactly who the Phantom Thieves were either. They spent half their resources on investigating you and your friends, while the other half tried to take *you* out, Akihiko."

Everything was hard to grasp. All she really knew was that her children were still in grave danger. "S-So, what's going to happen to Sae?"

All eyes turned to her as her hand clenched around her heart. If this was one giant plot to trap Makoto and her friends *and* eliminate Akihiko, what was their plan for Sae? Why were they using her? Akechi wouldn't have asked them to go after her if there wasn't a *reason…*

Akihiko leaned back and folded his arms over his chest. "Sae's still sitting on the fence. She doesn't know which side to take. My guess is that by having the enemy offer the Phantom Thieves on a silver plate, she'll be able to win her biggest case, and they're using that to bait her to their side. What happens to her depends on who outsmarts who first."

Minako threw her hands to her face to hide her tears. "She's our *daughter* . Not some prize to win at the end of the war!"

She was happy then that she had taken her seat next to Akihiko. His arms around her comforted her, even if she was slightly upset with the way he spoke about their daughter. "The fact that Sae was able to reach out to us with this kind of lead proves that she's doing what's right."

"I agree," Mitsuru added. "She could have just as easily listened to her boss and proceeded to treat the informant like she would any other criminal. This shows a great change in character."

"Why is Sae so much more different than the first time we went to her palace?"

It wasn't a question anyone really thought anyone would ask. However, now that it was out in the open, the entire ordeal was something Minako wanted to know. Why did Sae have a palace at all? How long had she had one? Since she was a teenager? Since she started her new job? And why didn't Minako, or Akihiko, or any of their other friends have one? Or why didn't half the population have one? Surely there were more dangerous people out in the world than her own daughter. Like this guy they were just talking about. Or Shido…

"I'm afraid I don't have an answer for you, Makoto," Mitsuru finally said as she leaned back in her seat. "Even with my team's research,

there's still so much we don't know. From what I've gathered from conversations with Amamiya and his team, as well as our own eyes, the Metaverse truly is the Dark Hour, but only accessible by those with the means. When we all investigated the situation in Inaba, if you had access to a TV, anyone could enter. However, the reality of the TV world was similar to the palaces in the Metaverse, where the shape of the world relied on the heart of the one who was inside it."

Mitsuru continued on. "While we are aware that certain levels of emotion can spawn these palaces, we still don't know to what extent. I imagine that your previous encounters have been criminals with a singular goal that corrupted them, but Sae is much more complex. She wants to use her anger to win, but winning in and of itself can be a trigger. It's hard to narrow down which emotion triumphs to create a palace, and as Sae is becoming more and more aware of what's happening around her, it could very well be changing her palace as well. We could also be completely wrong."

"There's no need to sugarcoat anything." Akihiko sighed heavily as he leaned forward. "She's still doing this to prove that I wronged her for years, and that has to be her foundation."

Makoto shook her head beside him. "The first time we went, she was upset with you, yes, but she has never spoken of you since." Makoto's eyes shot over to her, a reminder of their conversation earlier. She waited for Makoto to tell them all about it, but she instead kept it to herself.

"The human mind is a fragile thing." Mitsuru lifted a hand to her chin again. "It wouldn't be so farfetched as to believe that she is battling a million emotions and one could outweigh another on a different day. It's still unclear if that would have an effect on her palace."

Minako couldn't keep her question bottled up anymore. "Why Sae then? Why couldn't it have been someone else in town who hates just as badly as she does? Or someone in jail, or a million other criminals who roam these streets? Why did it have to be *my* daughter?"

The room fell silent once again. She fell against Akihiko completely, upset at herself for even asking. Akihiko and Makoto were already

suffering enough by trying to save Sae, something *she* had asked of them. Now, it made it seem that she was still holding onto a grudge that took Sae away from them all.

When Akihiko dropped his head into his free hand, she felt that knife wedge into her heart. She hadn't meant to blame him, or bring up past decisions. She just wanted to know *why.* It wasn't fair to her family. They had been through enough. Akihiko had meant well, and Sae had acted like a typical rebellious teenager. There had to be so much worse out there…

"I don't care why it happened, or how it happened, because it did. We know how to help her, and in some odd way, it's brought all of us back together." Akihiko sat up straight, and Minako couldn't stop herself from looking at him. He spoke with a strength she had forgotten he could possess when she needed him to lift her spirits back up. He was so *sure* everything would work out, even with his own insecurities and doubts and regrets.

He looked over at her, and she could feel a burning in the back of her eyes. "I can't say I'm happy this happened, given the source of her anger, but everything is coming full circle. We couldn't plan a way to trap our suspect in someone else's palace. He likely wouldn't have offered to go had it not been for their relationship. We can bring this all to an end, and I believe that is why she has one over the millions of others."

Sometimes, she hated his positive outlook on everything, the way he was so quick and confident in reassuring her that everything would be okay. That he didn't care about the *why* and the *how* , but about the path to fix it. She hated that his perception was always so different than hers…

Yet she loved him for it at the same time. It kept her from drowning, from focusing her time and energy on things she couldn't change. It gave her hope that things really would work out for the best. And now, she idolized that strength, that determination, and she trusted that Akihiko would do everything to save their daughter.

Makoto also seemed to think the same. "I-I agree. Things could be very different had Sis not given birth to a palace. And maybe we will

be able to learn more about how to help others by learning from her."

Minako just couldn't find her voice to say anything in return.

"I may never understand your concerns, but we are also closer to finding out the truth than we ever thought we would." Mitsuru reached out for the files sitting on the table in front of her. "We have evidence of Akechi speaking with people we already know are involved in this conspiracy. We believe that he's working on a plot to frame the Phantom Thieves while using Sae and her palace. With help from Fuuka and Sakura, we've been able to stay one step ahead. Now, we need to put our intelligence to use and initiate our own plan."

Fuuka clapped her hands together. "We have a basic outline, but we would like to see more of Sae's palace to finalize it all."

"Y-You already have a plan?" Makoto was surprised, and Minako was as well, but Akihiko was up on his feet before either Mitsuru or Fuuka could elaborate.

"I want to go with you."

Minako didn't think it was a good idea, based on what happened last time, but he was different now. But if he was going, she sure as hell wouldn't let him go alone. "I want to go, too."

She expected someone to protest, but she got quite the opposite. "I figured it would be dangerous to *not* have you both with us," Mitsuru grinned. "We will go in the evening whenever the children do not plan to go. Our goal is to learn the layout, not to fight or run into trouble. Someone will remain behind to make sure Sae is safe."

Mitsuru pushed herself to her feet after a subtle nod from Makoto, grabbing the bag at the end of the couch. "We still have a long way to go, time is running out, but we will get there. Please don't lose hope now."

Soon, she would see the inside of her daughter's palace. The very place where her own shadow had brought Makoto to the state she

was in earlier. The very place Akihiko shut down and Makoto had to save him. The very place that *was* Sae, the darkness and hatred and pride and stubbornness she flaunted for everyone to see…

Suddenly, she was grateful she didn't have her powers. She would have ignored Mitsuru, took off into the palace, fought everything that approached her, until she could reach her daughter.

Hell, she might do that anyway. Would the shadow version of Sae listen to her? Or maybe she could better understand where Sae was coming from if she had the chance to speak to her *heart.*

She would find out soon enough.

Chapter 148

Chapter 148

“I will kill you all!”

And she did. Every last one of her friends had taken a fatal shot while she just stood *there. The burning eyes of her mother, now turned into a demon, held her gaze for what felt like hours. Slowly, a wicked smile spread across her lips, but she couldn’t move away as the monster approached her. It reached out to her with long arms, its claws wrapping around her neck and squeezing tightly.*

“You were a mistake, Makoto. I never loved you. I should have killed you long ago and spared myself the heartache of losing the only child I loved!”

“I-I’m s-sorry…”

“To think you would betray your own sister for a man who doesn’t even love you…”

The hand tightened around her throat, effectively silencing her response. She couldn’t find the strength or the heart to fight back. The monster that had her mother’s voice seemed to notice and laughed at her own weakness.

“You’re weak, just like your father.”

Makoto shot awake, her hands instinctively flying to her neck. It was pitch black in her room. It was too cold. It was too quiet. She knew it was just a dream, but it all felt so *real.* Granted half of her dream actually had been real, the shadow didn’t kill any of her friends. It didn’t attack her as she stood on the sidelines and watched like a *coward.*

The words weren’t as easy to shake off. When she encountered her dad in Mementos, his shadow had spoken his darkest thoughts out loud, things he would *never* tell her or her mom. So did her mom

really feel that way about her, but wouldn't come right out and admit that? Her mom had a special relationship with Sae for years, until that Christmas Eve last year when her dad found out about it and stormed off. Her mom and Sae really hadn't been the same since.

But…her mom loved her. Makoto would know if her mom truly hated her. It was just a bad nightmare. And her dad's shadow had been in Mementos; her mom's was in Sae's palace. Sae had to have thought her mom felt that way, or *hoped* she felt that way. It still stung, because it then meant that *Sae* thought their mother didn't love her and wanted her *dead…*

She rolled over on her bed, willing herself to stop thinking about the lies and fall back asleep. If her mom hated her, she would show it around the house. If Sis wanted her dead, she could have easily done that by now. If they both blamed her dad for their misery, her mom would have left him, and Sis would have tossed him in jail…

She rolled over onto her other side. Would Sis conjure up a shadow of their dad? Would he defend her like their mom had tried to? Or would he only be there to laugh at Sae, to ridicule her, and her friends would be forced to fight him to save Sae?

…Would *she* have a shadow in Sae's palace?

Makoto stopped tossing around on the bed and forced herself into a seated position. With a million thoughts and questions running through her head, she wasn't going to sleep. Her throat was dry, a reminder of her recent nightmare, but she quickly threw herself out of the bed and walked to her door. Maybe some water would help calm her down. She sure as hell wasn't going to be of any use to anyone if she didn't get proper rest.

She just wasn't expecting someone else to be up. By the time she had entered the living room to head to the kitchen, it was far too late to turn and rush back to her room. "Makoto?"

It was her dad. He sat at the far couch to keep the light away from the hallway, probably to not wake her or her mom. There were a few papers on the table in front of him, on the couch beside him, and she was suddenly curious as to what he was working on.

“What are you doing?”

He, of course, leaned back with a grin. “What are *you* doing?”

She didn’t want to talk about her nightmare, her worries, because he looked like he was busy and she couldn’t interrupt him. “I, um, I was just getting some water.”

Her dad eyed her for a second or two before it became too much for her and she wandered off into the kitchen. Her hands were shaking as she pulled a cup from the cupboard. Her throat was still burning. She wondered if maybe she had a bruise on her neck and her dad had caught it? She managed to keep herself enough together that she filled up her glass successfully without dropping it before she turned to head back to her room.

“Are you alright?”

Makoto gripped the cup in her hands, taking a second to inhale, then exhale her concerns. Her dad was very busy. It was a nightmare. Nothing about it was true. He had more important things to worry about.

So, instead of ignoring him and running to her room, she took a few steps towards where he sat on the couch. It was hard to read the papers from her position and the low lightning, but she tried. “You seem very busy.”

Her dad didn’t buy her line of questioning, but he didn’t challenge her. “I’ve had a lot of new evidence come to me recently. Now I just have to make sense of it.”

“I see.” Makoto lowered herself to another couch, her eyes never leaving the papers on the table. She still wasn’t close enough to read anything. “Are you going to be able to arrest anyone soon?”

He shuffled some of the papers around, then stopped and dropped his head. “Your mother doesn’t hate you, Makoto.”

Her heart dropped into her stomach. “W-What?”

“She told me about what happened.” His eyes lifted to meet hers.

“And I’m assuming you’re still upset about it.”

What could she say to him to get him to think she was fine? She was a terrible liar, and even if she tried, he would *know* . She should have gone back to her room when she had the chance.

But she couldn’t walk away, knowing if she did, it would upset her dad and she would never be able to fall back asleep. “I-I’m sorry…” She held her hands together on her lap and dropped her eyes to them. “I know it’s not true. I know she doesn’t feel that way. I shouldn’t be so upset over it.”

The room was quiet for a few minutes. A part of her wondered if her dad found her answer acceptable and moved on. She lifted her eyes to see if he was back to work on his investigation, or something different. He didn’t appear to be doing anything, but his eyes were on the table in front of him, so she assumed the conversation was over.

“You know, when I came back from being overseas, I had to fight against a shadow version of your mother, too.”

His voice startled her, but his words took the breath right out of her lungs. “H-Huh?”

“I thought she was dead for so long, and then when I returned, Mitsuru told me she was alive. I was able to find a distraction from the news by fighting, but then at the end of it all, this version of her shows up out of nowhere and starts talking to me.”

He fell back against the couch as Makoto tightened her hands on her lap. “She told me she was so upset with me because I couldn’t protect her. She questioned how I could have possibly loved her if I couldn’t keep her from dying. And I stood there, a wreck, and let the others handle that fight. And I think that was why it was so hard to actually see your mother again, because I thought she was so angry with me for something out of my control.”

“H-How did you…did you deal with it?”

She thought it was a silly question, but he turned his head towards

her and smiled. “Oh, she made me deal with it. A part of me wanted to run back to the other side of the world, but she refused to let me run. She simply told me, ‘If you truly believe that I feel that way, then you can run. But I would hope you could tell the difference between the two of us, that I do love you, and I would chase you down until you understood that.’ And she can be very scary when she is trying to prove a point.”

Makoto was overcome with emotion, but instead of breaking down into tears like she thought she would, she broke out into laughter. Nothing about her dad’s memory was funny, but the way he spoke to her, and then ended with a joke her mother had *also* made earlier that night, brought out her laugh. She was quick to realize what she was doing, threw a hand over her mouth, but her dad only chuckled at her.

“I think your mother has some mixed feelings about me, my decisions of the past, but she loves you. She loves your sister. She would sacrifice her heart and soul if it made both of you happy in the end.”

Her laughter faded away and she was suddenly consumed with guilt. Of course her parents loved her. How could she think any differently? Because Sae wasn’t a part of their lives? Because Makoto worried she wasn’t doing enough to save her? She dropped her head again, whispered a pathetic, “I’m sorry,” before falling quiet once again.

A minute later, she felt a pressure on her head. When she looked up, her dad was smiling at her, his face relaxed, and his eyes happy. It was nice to see, enough that it pulled a smile from her as well. “The human mind really is a fragile thing. Just because you know something to be true doesn’t mean you will never have doubts. Don’t ever be afraid to talk to us about them, and your mother and I will be more than happy to clear them out, alright?”

It wasn’t at all how she expected to spend a good twenty minutes of her evening, but when her dad wished her a goodnight and she fell to her bed, her mind was much more calm. Her dreams were much less menacing. In fact, she could have sworn she had a dream about Ren training with her father and then they both beat the lights

out of Akechi.

Not only did the conversation help her sleep, it also gave her hope for the day. Makoto knew she had been on edge for a few days now, so her friends had been more on edge around her. There had been tension between her and Ren lately. All she wanted to do as she got ready for school was to clear the air with everyone.

Her mom didn't hate her. She didn't hate Sae.

Her dad loved her and her sister.

She had wonderful friends, who had been understanding during an extremely difficult time.

Now, she would save her sister, prove to the world that nothing could keep her down, and shove it all into Akechi's face when her dad finally arrested him.

Unfortunately, she didn't see Ren or any of her friends on the trains to school that morning. She had been up relatively early, even missing both of her parents (she did make them breakfast, but she was too energetic to wait for them to get up). She had hoped to run into Ren, or Haru, but she counted her blessings that she at least didn't run into Akechi or he would have ruined her mood.

Makoto resumed her morning routine of rushing up to the student council room to see if anything needed done, but she couldn't make it out of the room before someone else stepped inside with her and closed the door.

She turned quickly, ready to deal with an intruder, and to her surprise, Eiko was on her knees in front of her. "Please, Mako! I need help!"

Her heart did a flip in her chest. While Eiko hadn't been a priority, Makoto still felt bad for neglecting her. However, last they had spoken, she wanted a sum of money that she doubted she could provide. Maybe something else had happened now? "W-What's wrong?"

There were tears in the other girl's eyes that made her sick to her

stomach. “Please. I know last time I asked for a lot of money, but my Tsukasa is about to lose his job! He needs as much as you can give him. I’m trying to work as many hours as I can to help him, but it’s not enough!”

Makoto could easily spare Eiko a few hundred yen, but she was more curious as to why Tsukasa needed the money at all. Wasn’t he some fancy and spoiled rich kid? What had he done to be in a serious dilemma like this? Was he?

Trying to ask as much was difficult. “E-Eiko, I…I don’t think he really needs money.”

The glare she received in return made her spine straighten. “You don’t know him. He doesn’t want *me* to work. He wants me to study, because I can go to college and make him proud! *You* of all people should respect that.”

Her anger caught her off-guard. “W-Well, yes, but…he should be able to take care of himself…”

Eiko at least lost the glare and lowered her head again. “He’s *trying* , but he needs a little bit of help! I can’t ask my parents. I can’t ask *anyone else.* Please, Makoto. You’re the only one I can ask.”

It wasn’t a satisfying answer, but Makoto couldn’t refuse again. Not with how deeply upset Eiko appeared to be. “I’m afraid I don’t have much, but I can give you what I can.”

Her friend shot her head up, eyes dry and a wide smile. “Really? You’re the best!”

“Under one condition.” Makoto held up a hand, then added, “I want to be there to give it to him myself.”

Makoto was dying to know exactly what Tsukasa had done to warrant a large amount of debt, or if he was trying to swindle money out of someone who was too blind to see the danger. She had one experience in her life that she would never wish upon anyone else. Tsukasa was no Kaneshiro, but that didn’t make the crime any less forgiving.

Plus, her dad could be there, too. It would be the perfect set-up. She just had to hope he would be willing to go the day she planned on going.

Eiko stood from her spot and reached out and hugged her tightly. “You are the best, Mako! I can see why he’s such a fan of you, too!”

Oh, he was a fan of her alright; just in a creepy way that wasn’t appropriate.

Then, Eiko had to get in a shot before she hurried away. “I hope you know that if *your* boyfriend doesn’t live up to my Tsukasa, he’ll be more than happy to take care of that!”

She scampered off long before Makoto could find her voice. How could Eiko not see that Tsukasa was a liar, a cheat, and only using her for monetary value? And then compare him to *Ren?* Ren may not have been perfect, but he was far beyond that compared to Tsukasa.

Thanks to that thought, Makoto decided to head down to class early to avoid running into anyone else. She was sure her scowl would scare people away the second they stepped into the room. She’d rather not upset an innocent student with a question about tutoring or troubles around school…

She cursed under her breath as she went to pick up her bag and she heard the door open. “Hey you.”

It was Ren. Because he usually did stop by and see her if she had beaten him to school. She watched him step into the room completely as she lifted her bag onto her shoulder. “H-Hi, Ren…”

Most days, he would smile, maybe give her a quick kiss if they were alone, then walk her down the stairs to where he went to his class and she continued to hers. He looked much more worried this time around, and given their last few days, she was suddenly afraid he was going to put her in her place and walk away.

“So, um…how are you doing today?”

Ren was never nervous around her, so the fact that he was

stumbling over words just to break the ice made her feel terrible. She was truly lucky to have him in her life. She only wished she could have more to say to him without sounding like a scared kid. “Um, I-I’m…good…”

The smile he gave her was forced, and it was the final crack to her heart. “I’m sorry I haven’t been a good friend lately.” She ended it there, knowing everything that would follow would be an excuse. He already knew she was worried about her sister. He already knew that she was biting her tongue around Akechi. She didn’t want him to know about the drama between her, Eiko, and *her* boyfriend.

As soon as the silence took over, Makoto was sure that was that. He would walk away, or agree with her and walk away, but she forgot this was *Ren* . He cared about her. He *loved* her. So while her body was surprised that he wrapped his arms around her, her heart was not.

“You need to give yourself more credit,” he whispered into her hair. “If I was in your position right now, I’d be a wreck, and everyone would know it. You’re so strong. Sometimes, it makes me sad because all I want to do is catch you when you’re falling, but you find your footing on your own.”

She returned the embrace, happy to hear that he wasn’t going to walk away from her, or leave her for good. “I think you catch me more than you think you do.”

He chuckled, which brought a smile to her face. “Well, if my queen says so, then it must be so.”

She missed his charm. She missed being held by him. She missed the ease in which both of them could speak their mind, or say nothing at all, and still feel *good* . “And I say so.”

He pressed his lips into her hair, then slowly pulled away from her. “Then I am humbled.”

Makoto figured it was a good time to start heading to class, but Ren, being Ren, stopped her from walking off. Her mind blanked when she looked into his eyes, but he soon leaned into her and kissed

her. It was brief, nothing impressive, but it left her weak all the same.

“Shall I escort you to class, my Queen?”

Her face burned and she tried to cover it up with her hands. Yes, she missed his over the top comments, but she would never not be embarrassed by them. She would have to get better at that.

“Are you doing anything this weekend?”

Ren’s question caused her to slam the door closed on accident, and she turned to him quickly. “Um…n-no?”

His smile brought the heat back to her face. “I’m really eager to try a new recipe from your book. A recipe fit for a queen. If you’ll have it, of course.”

Makoto wondered if any other guy could be cute and sly about asking a girl on a date in the way Ren could. From speaking to her mother, her dad sure as hell would never act like this. From books and TV shows, no one was like this. But Ren pulled it off so effortlessly and perfectly that it always left her speechless.

“M-My book?”

Ren’s smile widened. “Yeah. Sojiro loves it, too, but I warned him it was mine and he needs to ask for permission to even touch it.”

She had forgotten all about it, since it had been a stupid thing to give him when he had given her something so much better. To hear that he was actually using it, enjoying it, *and* someone else was putting it to use, made her happy.

His hand latched onto hers as she struggled to find her own voice. “O-Oh! W-Well, I…I don’t think I’m busy…”

Beside her, Ren exhaled dramatically, as if he really was holding his breath waiting for her answer. Was he? Did he really think she would deny him? “Wonderful. I really didn’t want to spend another night alone listening to Morgana complain about Ryuji and how to charm women with his mad skills.”

Makoto lifted her free hand to her mouth to keep her laugh quiet. “Perhaps Morgana is more of an expert than you think he is.”

“Oh, no, I worked so hard to get you, he’s not allowed to charm you. I’ll deny him sushi for the rest of his furry little life.”

To be joking and laughing and *happy* with him again elated her. The tension between them over the past few days was a distant memory at this point. It was almost like it was never there at all.

“I can only say that because Morgana isn’t here to claw my spine out.”

She giggled into her hand again, choosing to slowly walk beside him rather than rush off to class. They still had a few minutes. And right now, she wanted to soak up as much time with him as possible, especially given how he was making her feel.

However, Ren soon came to stop at the corner, cleared his throat into his hand, then turned to address her. “Um, I actually was hoping to do some, I guess… *studying* …with you, too…”

He was nervous again, and she had no idea why. Did he need help with a class? Last she had heard, he was doing well in school, so what on earth did he need help studying? “Are you struggling in a class?”

He coughed out a laugh, and for the first time in her life, Makoto caught a small blush spreading across his face. “No, I…uh…” She was growing worried the longer he stalled, but more confused at his actions. The blush was still on his face. He lifted a hand to his head, something he did when he was nervous. He couldn’t make eye contact with her…

She tried to ease him out of asking her for help. “It’s okay, Ren. Whatever you need help studying, I’ll be more than happy to-,”

He broke out into a laugh, but she didn’t know how to take it. “You are seriously so cute, you know that?”

Her response burned on her tongue and she looked away.

A second later, he leaned closer to her, but she couldn't tell who was giving off more heat this time around. "I really just want to study *you."*

What could possibly be exciting about her? Did he want to pick her brain for new strategies? She hadn't been herself lately, so that might be for the best. So, she nodded her head. "I guess it would be wise to have someone else become knowledgeable about enemy weakness and the like."

She looked up at him when she heard his hand slap his face. Why would he have done that? He was still shaking with mild laughter, so she assumed she had said something wrong *again.* But what?

"I'll just say it," he said quietly, taking a second to adjust his glasses. Again, he struggled to make eye contact with her. "Remember a while back in my room and I had to stop you before things became a little…you know, *heated?"*

It took her half a second to remember what he was talking about. And when it finally dawned on her what he had been trying to get across to her for a few minutes, her hands flew to her face to cover up the blush that would set the school on fire.

"I won't do anything you don't want to, but I thought maybe we could do something…?"

She was literally burning to the point she barely heard what he had said. The images and the emotions from the night he had brought up were blocking her mind from thinking. She thought it would be nice to see what could have happened had she not stopped him, but… right before class? How was she going to focus on her lecture if all she was thinking about was him, on the couch, and his hands on her skin?

Ren pulled her against him with another chuckle. "I probably shouldn't have brought this up before class, but I was kinda nervous that if I didn't ask now, I wouldn't be able to."

The first warning bell echoed down the hallway. Makoto had to push off of Ren, but it took several more seconds to calm herself down

enough to lower her hands from her face. “I-It’s…o-okay…”

It really wasn’t, because he was going to invade her mind all day when she needed to pay attention in class. He likely knew that, because he slowly came into her line of sight with a grin that made her think he knew exactly what he was doing.

“Looks like neither one of us are going to be taking any notes today, huh?”

She pushed him for good measure, pulling a laugh out of him as he followed behind her to the staircase. Before she took the first step, she stopped abruptly, causing Ren to smack into her. She turned over her shoulder, trying to match his earlier smug grin with one of her own.

“I suggest you take good notes in your classes, Ren.” His eyes widened, likely taken off balance at her playful expression. *Good.* “I don’t think you’ll be a good study partner if you can’t even study in class.”

Makoto left him standing in the hall, mouth open and eyes still wide, unable to chase after her or say anything. It was powerful, and a part of her wondered if this was how he always felt when he left her speechless. She felt like she was walking on clouds, over a fire pit, because she did drop a serious innuendo and she had *never* done that in her life…

She counted her lucky stars that her teacher chose that day to ask everyone *but* her to participate in class.

Chapter 149

Chapter 149

“If you drink anymore coffee, you’re going to die of heart failure, Aki.”

Akihiko ignored Minako’s comment and sat himself back down on the couch, placing the fresh cup of coffee off to the side of his notes. There was so much work to be done, so many new questions to answer, so little time to accomplish anything. It wasn’t rare for him to rely heavily on caffeine to keep his mind running and his heart pumping, but it had been a while since he was this active. He figured he had a lot of lost time to make up. Sleep was no longer an option.

Minako, however, refused to give up. “Seriously. You can tell Makoto that sleep is important for a clear mind and rejuvenated spirit, and then you can’t do it yourself.”

It was much harder to brush off her attempt when she came to sit next to him and pulled on his collar. Her eyes were red, a sign she was about to fire off a million threats in a tone he really didn’t like to hear. No matter how serious his work was, or a particular case, nothing in the world could top the look she had mastered over the years to pull all of his focus onto her.

“Stop. Overworking. Yourself.”

He tried to lean back just to *breathe* , but she wouldn’t let him. “I-I just…I know I’m so close…”

His defense proved futile as she yanked him closer to her. “It’s not going to mean anything if you’re dead because you forgot to rest properly.” She released him and he fell back against the couch. “And you wonder why Makoto worries to the point she doesn’t sleep. She gets it from you.”

Well, he wasn’t about to deny that, but Minako’s voice grew quiet. He was used to her snapping at him over choosing to stay up all night rather than go to bed, but given the drama between the family

and Sae, Akihiko couldn't ignore the fact that Minako had a point. Makoto was more tense, not eating as well, likely tossing and turning for nights on end. It was much harder to see someone he loved struggling with a runaway mind than to admit he had one himself.

Still, he was *so close* to ending the case that had been haunting him for months. As soon as he put Shido and his accomplices behind bars, the sooner Minako could have him all to herself. And he would sleep for days if she told him to.

"I think you both need a break."

While Akihiko agreed, he one, refused to give up his thought process on his current case. Two, he knew he wouldn't actually take a break; his mind would still be on that damn case. Three, Makoto would find her break with friends or *Amamiya.*

Scratch that.

He *could* take a break. Minako just wouldn't approve of him instilling fear in Amamiya…

However, Minako said nothing after a long, drawn out sigh, then headed off into the kitchen. He hesitated about following behind her, apologizing for being so single-minded, but he kept reminding himself that as soon as everything was wrapped up and done, he could take a break. Hopefully, that was sooner rather than later.

For her sake and his…

He was lost in his own mind for a while, until he felt another weight come to sit on the other side Minako had occupied earlier. He expected it to be her, but got a surprise when Makoto was next to him. He quickly shot a glance to the clock, realized what time it was, then tried to gain control on his spiraling mind.

Makoto found something entertaining. "Mom says you're wired off caffeine right now."

Akihiko had his fair share of coffee in the past, his fair share of sleepless nights, but he was thinking to himself that maybe five cups

of coffee at his age probably didn't have the effect it used to. "I-I might be."

He heard a quiet laugh. "Mom also said maybe you needed a break from whatever you're working on."

That got him to calm down enough to where he didn't think the world was spinning. How long had Makoto been home? Did they already go to Sae's palace? Did they not go? Had she plotted something with her mother to get him out of the house and away from his notes?

"But I…I actually do need your help with something."

He looked over at Makoto with confusion, his mind questioning every little thing and unable to stop. She looked shy, nervous, but whether that was because of her request or the fact he was acting oddly, he didn't know.

So, he tried to put an end to his thoughts. "Is this about Amamiya?"

Her eyes went wide and her cheeks darkened to the point he *felt* the heat. Every time the boy crossed Makoto's mind, she always acted shy and hesitant. What else would she have wanted to bring up if it wasn't him?

Her hands flew to her face a moment later. "N-No! Wh-Why would you t-think that?"

"Oh," he said in surprise. "Why else would you act like this?"

He thought he heard her grumble behind her hands. "I wanted to ask you for your help in dealing with that creepy guy!"

It took him a second to run through the list of "creepy" guys. "Tsukasa?"

Makoto only nodded her head, her hands still shielding her face. In the meantime, Akihiko thought it might be for the best to work on some kind of trap to catch the guy and help Makoto's friend. After all, time wasn't going to make things any better. If anything, it would get worse.

But…there was so much that needed his attention. Shido was literally in his sights. The deadline to Sae's threat was fast approaching. They were going to Sae's palace that weekend to work on the last little bit of their plan. He needed to be focused for that…

"Dad?"

"I think you both need a break."

Maybe Minako was right. There had been numerous times in the past that a few days off made him come back with a clearer mind. Maybe that missing link would come to him if he pushed it to the side for a little bit.

"Sorry." He shook his head, suddenly feeling tired rather than alert. "What do you need help with?"

As his mind slowly started to switch gears, Makoto shifted beside him. "Um. M-Maybe…you could, come with me?"

"You have a plan already?"

Either Makoto jumped in her place because of his voice, or she was surprised by his question. "W-Well, k-kind of…"

Akihiko tried to keep his annoyance out of his posture. If Makoto didn't have a plan of attack, then they would have to make one. Which could distract them both for days, or weeks. And he couldn't afford to lose that much time.

She likely picked up on it anyway. "I know you're busy, but rule number five, Dad. I'm asking you for help because this goes beyond me, or my friend. He could easily go after someone else."

Sometimes, he was so frustrated when she used his own words against him. But he was extremely proud of her at the same time. She was learning. She was growing. And best of all, she was still relying on him. She may no longer be a little girl, but she wouldn't just drop out of his life like her sister…

"I-I might…have something, thought up…"

Akihiko watched Makoto reach across her body to the bag by the end of the couch. She pulled out her phone and slowly lifted it closer to him. When he gave her a questioning look, she dropped her eyes from his with another shy smile. “I…”

“Makoto.” For the past few minutes, his mind was struggling to narrow in on the problem Makoto had brought up. He was still thinking about Sae, about Shido, about the dire consequences of failing. Now, that sense of pride was the punch he needed to take that “break” Minako had told him to before.

She sighed quickly, a sign that she was about to cut through her anxiety and get down to business. “He has my number. I’ve never responded to anything, but he never refers to me by name. He never uses Eiko’s name. We’re all *babes* or *princesses* to him. So I thought if I could plan a way to show Eiko she’s nothing special to him, she’ll break up with him.”

He folded his arms and leaned back into his seat. “And you need my help with what, exactly?”

“I’m assuming he won’t take kindly to me outing him to his obedient source of income.” Makoto turned to face him with more seriousness. “While I feel confident in my strength, I’m not a cop. If I assault him, suddenly *I’m* the criminal.”

“You do realize I don’t have grounds to arrest him, right?”

She didn’t lose her enthusiasm. “So how am I supposed to get him in trouble?”

Kabukicho was his district. He could probably get a warrant easily enough, with proper cause. As of right now, and according to Makoto, Tsukasa sadly hadn’t done anything illegal. Immoral, yes, but not criminal. “What’s your end goal here, Makoto?”

Her eyes narrowed in confusion, taken off guard by his question. “W-What do you mean?”

He leaned forward and rested his arms on his knees. “Do you want him to get in trouble? Or do you want to help your friend?”

Her answer came easily enough. “Both.”

And it pulled a chuckle from his throat. “You can’t have it both ways.”

“Why not?” she asked with a scowl. “He’s conning her for money. Isn’t that a crime?”

“Do you know how many people would be in jail if we arrested every single person who *talked* about criminal actions?” His head fell, and the stretch he felt in his neck was wonderful. He hadn’t realized he had been so tense for god knows how long. “I could have had you arrested at the age of five when you said you were going to steal all your mother’s candy and hide it.”

Some of Makoto’s earlier blush reilluminated her face. “U-Um…I-I don’t think this is…t-the same…”

He smirked at her reaction. “No, it’s not. But you can’t judge intent from a bunch of words. Which is why I asked you where your end goal fell.” He took a breath, then continued. “If you want to save your friend, then follow your plan. But in doing so, you have to let Tsukasa walk away. Because in opening your friend’s eyes to his scheme, he’s technically a liar, not a criminal.”

He held up his hand when Makoto glared at him. “If you want to have Tsukasa arrested, you run the risk of losing your friend. She may get caught in his lies, be swayed into whatever he wants her to do, but it’s only when she tells him to stop that he crosses that line.”

Her glare didn’t fade. “And how many more girls is he going to sweet-talk for a quick payout before he’s pulled off the streets if he walks away?”

He had a reply ready, but then it died on his tongue. While Tsukasa was a known con-artist who targeted young females, he wasn’t all that threatening. However, it was a similar question he had asked long ago about Kamoshida. How long did one person have on the streets before someone finally *did* something about it?

Back then, he took the law into his own hands. Hell, he went as far as trying to *kill* the man in his own station. And while Tsukasa was

far from Kamoshida, he was worried his daughter had valid reasoning in her cause.

“I’ll see what I can do,” he finally answered. “But for now, I want you to take this one step at a time. Don’t let your heart become set on saving the many when you can’t help the few in front of you.”

His words seemed to work. Makoto nodded her head slowly, understanding, but not thrilled. She returned her attention to her phone, and he grew curious when she started typing out a message to someone. He assumed it was to Amamiya, which made the tension return to his neck, but he chose to ignore it. As much as he *wanted* to know what she was telling him, it wasn’t his place. She would think him too nosy and then not talk to him at all.

“There.” Makoto stood up abruptly. “I just sent him a message I’ve been constructing for weeks.”

The frustration in her tone led him to believe she did not text Amamiya. But he really didn’t think she would have been ready to go after Tsukasa *now.* “What did you tell him?”

Her phone *pinged* in the three seconds it took for him to ask her, but Makoto showed him the phone rather than answer his question. “I’m going to end this tonight. If I don’t, Eiko is going to start working off *his* debt while I’m focused on Sis.” He watched her inhale deeply before she turned to lock eyes with him. “So maybe after dinner, we can walk around town again?”

She had a smile on her face that left him thinking of her mother, cunning and adventurous and up to no good. He was in enough shock that Makoto took his silence as an answer and walked off to where her mother was setting the table behind them. He sure as hell wanted to tell her that she was too excited, that he hadn’t even approved of her plan to begin with, but he literally couldn’t do anything.

In a way, he was upset with her.

In another way, he was extremely proud of her.

Akihiko agreed to accompany Makoto only if she swore to stay out of trouble. While he would be in the area, the entire plot was hers to control. From the millions of texts she sent to god knows who (she got her texting talent from her mother, that was for sure), to the exact words she would say to her friend in front of her boyfriend. It was all in her hands. He would just be around in case Tsukasa wasn't a friendly person when cornered.

Minako didn't even hesitate telling Makoto that she was perfectly content with spending the evening free from "trouble" herself. (She gave him a hard stare at that, which earned a laugh from Makoto.) In fact, she chuckled at him, then said, "If you don't keep your dad physically active, he's going to get fat." Which again earned another laugh from Makoto as he failed to have anything wise to say back to her.

So, after a relatively interactive dinner, Makoto put into motion the last leg of her plan. Akihiko simply followed behind her, from the apartment, to the station, to the heart of the place he used to call his second home. He was a mix of a million emotions. He was desperate to know what Makoto was doing, but being too timid to ask her for details. It was Makoto, his daughter, his *little girl,* and yet he couldn't do anything as he watched her walk some distance away from him, her head up, her back straight, like she knew how to take on the world alone. He was anxious, since he had no idea what Makoto was doing, but interested to see what she was going to do. Which led to the swell of pride in his chest.

He raised her well. For once in his life, he wasn't overcome with guilt thinking about the life he *should* have given her…

Maybe that was why he felt calm enough to let her walk off without telling him nothing. He trusted her.

Plus, it was kind of nice to get out of the apartment that had been suffocating him all day.

No matter where he went, Akihiko kept Makoto in his line of sight. For a while, she simply walked around, maybe looking for Tsukasa or her friend, but she never seemed to slow down. She had a purpose. It made him smile from several meters away, her

confidence contagious, as she continued to navigate the area like she was a well-trained officer and not a high school student.

Feeling the sense of trust he had for Makoto, it was easy to get sidetracked. When was the last time he even came to Kabukicho? When was the last time he interacted with someone who wasn't a family member, a friend, or a coworker? It was something he used to stress to new police officers, that knowing the law wasn't what made someone a good cop. It was knowing the *people* , being proactive, investing time into the community, and leading by example.

Just because he was on his last leg didn't mean he needed to let that mentality die. In a sense, he was grateful Makoto had pushed him out of his mind and onto the streets again. He was grateful for her intelligence and faith in herself so he could take his eyes off of her and look around him. Not once since they had left had he thought about Sae's anger, Shido's crimes, the unending tangled mess of politics and drama.

When Makoto finally came to a stop to talk to a female he presumed to be Eiko, Akihiko took his chance to talk to the locals like he always did. Not only would he reestablish that trust between citizens and the police, he could also make it seem like he wasn't tailing his daughter in case she needed him.

He spoke to a florist, someone who recognized him as soon as he said hello. She smiled widely at him, pointed to a small bouquet of flowers, then told him, "You're such a fine man, Sanada-san. I always wonder if you've ever given flowers to someone special."

Akihiko turned to walk away after telling the woman that he had, in fact, bought flowers for someone special. "I don't do it often because she prefers sweets over everything." The woman laughed, waved a goodbye, and he carried on down the street like he was on the job and bored out of his mind.

By the time he had spoken to three store owners and was guilted into buying a rare box of assorted mochi, Makoto and her friend were joined by Tsukasa himself. He decided to wait things out in case he needed to bail Makoto or her friend out of trouble. He was reaching into his pocket for his phone when he saw Makoto turn to

her friend, an angry look on her face, and lifted her hand to slap the girl in front of her.

Akihiko dropped the box of mochi.

Never in his life would he have imagined Makoto to raise her hand to anyone. She always wanted to do what was best for someone, even sacrificing her own well-being for the sake of others. She was like her mother; so forgiving and understanding. Even when Minako felt like someone was walking all over her, she always had such a positive outlook on the situation.

“Hey, if I’m the necessary piece to help them out, then they can use me. They aren’t hurting me or anything. Where else is my time going to go?”

But for Makoto to flip that switch and physically attack a *friend* reminded him of the time he lashed out at Shinji for being so stubborn and not returning to the dorm. It likely came on a whim; she was irritated, her plan wasn’t going well, and she didn’t know what else to do.

But unlike the time he hit Shinji, her friend took off in a fit of rage and tears. Makoto looked like she wanted to chase after her, but she was quick to turn her attention to the man stepping up next to her. The menacing glare he showed was what made Akihiko close the distance between them, momentarily forgetting that his daughter had slapped someone in front of him.

“Everything okay here?”

He could pass off as being a curious bystander, or doing his job since he was walking through his own district. Checking up on the welfare of younger teenagers was his job. And the look on Tsukasa’s face was dark enough to feel obligated to step between the two of them.

Tsukasa practically spit at him, lifting a finger to point at Makoto. “Bitch here is gonna regret messin’ with me!” He assumed Tsukasa had no idea he was a cop when he took a step forward until he was literally in his personal space. “Now get the fuck outta my way or I’ll

break you, too."

He laughed at that. However, Makoto tried to walk around him. "I'm not afraid of you. You'll be the one to regret messing with my friend!"

Akihiko felt like he was back at home, stopping a fight from breaking out between Sae and Makoto over who had to take a bath first. He sighed loudly while holding his arm out to keep Makoto behind him and not lunging for the steaming man in front of them. "Enough."

Thankfully, his tone reached Makoto and he felt her take a step back instead of forward. Tsukasa didn't do the same. "I'll end you too, old man."

He was willing to let the comment slide, but Tsukasa lifted a fist and hit him in the jaw. It didn't hurt terribly, as he saw it coming and managed to avoid anything serious. Makoto gasped behind him, but Akihiko grinned and used the attack to his advantage. When Tsukasa lifted his hand for another strike, Akihiko quickly grabbed his wrist, twisted it behind his back, and slammed his chest into a nearby wall. Tsukasa squirmed in his grip, then became still the more pressure he applied to his wrist.

"What was it again, trainee? Assaulting a police officer is a felony?"

Makoto stared back at him in shock, then awe, then her face fell with a nod. "Y-Yes…"

It wasn't the reaction he expected. So, he pulled on Tsukasa's wrist one last time, then quite literally threw him out into the street. "If I see your face around another teenage girl, your ass is going to jail."

The other man glared at him, but wisely kept his mouth shut and stormed off. When he was out of sight, he turned his attention to Makoto, who had lifted a hand to rest on top of her opposite shoulder, her head still lowered to her chest. "Makoto?"

He noticed her hand grab at her shirt, either out of pain or frustration. She remained silent, keeping her eyes down, so it was hard to get an idea of what was happening. He had been too far away to hear anything, and she may have been upset with herself

for slapping a friend in the heat of the moment. He came to stand beside her, dropping one of his hands to her other shoulder.

“Hey. You alright?”

Her head lifted, her eyes narrowed, but she never turned to look at him. “Why?”

“Um.” Akihiko moved slightly to stand in front of her, lowering himself to be in her line of sight. “Why what?” He worried she was mad at him for interrupting. Or she was mad at him for not interrupting sooner.

He got quite the opposite. “Why can’t I get through to her?”

She never lifted her head to look at him, but he almost fell back on his heels. It took him several seconds to realize what she had asked. It took him several more seconds to come up with anything to say to her. “Well. Some people are stubborn.”

His answer didn’t sit well with her. “He’s a creep. She knows the kind of man he is now. She knows he’s only using her for money. But yet, she’s so *mad* at me. I…I don’t get it…”

The more she spoke, the weaker her voice became, and the more her head dropped to her chest. She was upset, but she had nothing to be upset over. She did all she could. It was a hard lesson to learn, but life wasn’t always a storybook. Not everyone appreciated a hero. Not everyone wanted to think for themselves.

He carefully dropped an arm over her shoulders. “You know, there was a time when we were in the Dark Hour as teenagers, and I was always part of the team to head into the tower to fight. Your mom was a great leader, intelligent, strong-willed, and stubborn when she needed to be. And I remember one day, she refused to take me along.”

Slowly, Makoto lifted her head, confused and intrigued as to why he decided to share a memory from the past. “I was so angry, but too surprised to say anything to her that night. So when she told me to sit out another night, I got really upset. I think it was honestly the first

time I snapped at her."

"W-Where is this coming from?"

He ignored her. "I was so mad. Fighting was all I had. Proving my strength and protecting everyone was the very core of who I was. Until that moment, no one stood in my way. And when she did, it was like I ran straight into a brick wall. I yelled at her, told her she was making a mistake, and I don't even remember what else I said to her. Mitsuru had to calm me down, remind me that Minako was in charge, and I had no choice but to sit out. You *know* how scary Mitsuru can be when she wants to be."

Makoto still looked so confused, but she didn't interrupt. "Looking back on it, it was hard for Minako to stand up to me, but she did. And I kept snapping at her or giving her the cold shoulder during school days. In a way, she ripped out my soul and I knew I had to fight her to get it back. I had to fight again. I had to prove myself to her again. But she wouldn't let me.

"But, your mom was evil in her own way. Devious, I guess." Makoto perked up hearing this, and Akihiko sighed heavily at the memory. "She kept me on the bench while they travelled through this specific area, then surprised me the last day and told me I was allowed to join the party."

Makoto waited patiently for him to continue on. "And to say I didn't get my ass handed to me is an understatement. The enemies we had to fight were my weakness, and not once did your mom or Yukari even bother to help me."

He heard a muffled laugh next to him. "It sounds like Mom got the last laugh in the end."

"Yeah, she did." He chuckled as well. "And I figured she was going to rub it in my face because I was hospitalized for a night following the battle. But, she didn't. She came into my room, even when I was so humiliated and owing her an apology. She told me that the reason she kept benching me was because she couldn't stand the thought of losing someone when she *knew* what was going to happen."

Akihiko returned his attention to Makoto, who seemed to make some connection in her head. “What I’m trying to tell you is that people don’t like being told that they are wrong. That they can’t do something. They don’t like someone coming in and trying to change their way of thinking when it’s been working for them for so long. And with that mentality, we are blinded. That’s where a good friend comes in.”

“I don’t think Eiko wants to be my friend anymore,” Makoto added with a hint of sadness to her tone. She tried to look away from him, but he tilted her chin to keep her eyes up and on him.

“Don’t tell your mom, but I hated her those few days. But she was not only smart enough to realize the danger she would have put me in, but she had the heart to stand up to me and try her best to protect me. And just like with your friend, there’s only so much you can do. If she doesn’t get the picture, like I did, being fed to the wolves will change her mind pretty quick.”

Her eyes burned in anger. “I don’t want her to be fed to the wolves.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “You’ve done all you can, Makoto. I’m sure she’s just angry with the situation and not with you. Give her some time. She’ll come around.”

“And if she doesn’t?”

Another sigh escaped his lips. “Just…don’t lose yourself over it,” he replied. “You have other things to focus on. There’s no need to waste your energy and time on someone who doesn’t want to be saved.”

Whether or not Makoto accepted his answer, he couldn’t tell. She fell silent as she slowly started to walk next to him towards the station. There were a million thoughts going through his head on how to convince her that her friend would be fine, but it was difficult turning those thoughts into words. Makoto looked so upset next to him, and it was hard to see. Especially when she really did something that most people wouldn’t ever do for their friends.

“It takes a lot of strength to stand up to your enemies, but even more

to stand up to your friends." He dropped a hand on Makoto's shoulder, stopping her in her place, and gave her a smile. "You should be proud of yourself. There are a lot of other people in the world who don't have friends who can tell them they're in trouble. And in my line of work, it happens far more than you want it to."

She released her breath, but her face relaxed enough to make him believe she was feeling better. "Thank you, Dad." Then, she met his eyes and smiled back. "How many more times did Mom put you in your place growing up?"

Akihiko just couldn't admit to her that he had long lost track.

Chapter 150

Chapter 150

He could count on one hand the number of times he had been smacked in the head with a flying piece of chalk.

Ren was pretty sure he was dusting remnants out of his hair after the final bell rang. Ann turned to him with a wide grin. Morgana had chuckled from his spot in his desk. His peers were either extremely disappointed (he had become a sort of ninja to some) or amused. He had done rather well that day in class, given the conversation with Makoto that morning, until the lecture took a turn that just *had* to happen the same day…

He never hated biology until that exact moment, talking about the variety of ways plants, animals, and microorganisms reproduced…

He could practically *hear* Makoto laughing at him as his pencil slid over his notebook and onto the desk.

It was a childish reaction. It was life. It was a typical lesson that most of his classmates, and himself, already had once in their life. It shouldn't have been a big deal. But for the rest of the lecture, and the following one, where he was attacked with the chalk, he couldn't escape the reality that he was a hormonal boy with a very pretty girlfriend who had ended their conversation with something so uncharacteristic but super-hot…

"Are you alright, Ren?"

Ren snapped to attention hearing his name, finding Ann staring back at him with narrowed eyes. He opened his mouth, hoping something coherent would come out, then shook his head when he couldn't get his brain to work fast enough.

A second or two later, he was able to reply with, "I'm fine. It's just been a stressful few days."

Ann reached over and placed her hand on his forearm with a look he couldn't place. "Do you know the best way to relieve stress?"

Oh god.

Did…did she *know* his thought process? Was she about to wink at him and pat him on the back and tell him *it's about time!* Or was she disgusted with him for thinking about it at all? Had Makoto said something to her at lunch, perhaps?

"Shopping!"

Ren didn't know which fell first; his heart into his stomach, his glasses off his face, or his face onto the desk. He doubted Ann was thinking along the same lines he had been, but she might start questioning him harder after his dramatic reaction.

And Morgana, of course, was the first to comment on it. "You're acting really weird, Ren."

"I should probably head home and get some sleep," he said after a long pause. They wouldn't be going to the palace that day, as Makoto had told him through a text at lunch that she needed to head home to take care of something. Ryuji's mom was sick and needed him to buy her medicine and groceries. Haru's family had to discuss her father's business that night. It was a good day to take a break. And he sure as hell needed it right now.

"Well," Ann started happily. "If you need to burn off some steam, or clear your mind before you head home, I'll be with Shiho in the underground mall!"

He watched her push herself out of her seat, then offered her a smile. "I appreciate it."

Ren was much slower getting to his feet, but knowing the rest of his friends were off doing their own thing made him feel so much better. No one else would make comments he would take the wrong way, think inappropriate thoughts, then make himself look like a lusting high-schooler who couldn't stop thinking about his really hot girlfriend…

And he was so drawn into his concerns that he missed the stairwell and smacked into the corner of the wall.

Morgana found it hilarious. “Wow, Ren. Walk much?”

On his way to the station, he did a million things to keep his mind out of the gutter. He counted the number of people he saw walking away from him. He downloaded a new app on his phone to play around with while he waited for the train. He tried to think about what would happen if Morgana broke through his bag and everyone started screaming because there was a *monster* loose in the station. And of course, Morgana would be upset, or maybe that would be the final stab at his little not-cat’s heart and he would go on a killing spree…

…Maybe in some ways, he really did need sleep.

To get him out of his mind, Ren reached for his phone and pulled up his message log with Makoto. She didn’t tell him *what* she was doing after school, and he figured the distraction would be helpful as he waited for the train. He wondered if she had even left school, if her “business” had been student council related, or if it was family related.

And just like that, his desire to have Makoto underneath him was quashed by thinking of her family. Her sister would probably have his head. Her dad would burn the rest of his body. He was slightly curious to know what her mother would think, but he was far too embarrassed to ask.

Just closing up a case.

Ren smiled reading the message from Makoto. A part of him was interested to know what case she was working on, who she was working on it with, if he could do anything to help…

…Then it hit him.

Her friend. Eiko. And that creepy guy from the café. The only reason Ren didn’t frantically get off the train in Shibuya to rush over to where Makoto lived was one: she may not be home and he had no

idea where she would be, and two: her dad had been helping her with that case. However, he was quick to fire off a reply to make sure she wasn't getting into trouble on her own.

Should I be jealous you didn't ask me to be your "partner"?

He wanted to come across as his usual self, but he was mentally scrambling for what to do. That creep host guy wasn't someone he wanted her to face alone, even if she told her dad she would be confronting him. Not that he could see Sanada being the type of father to willingly allow Makoto to handle a criminal on her own, but he didn't *know.* Now he just had to hope that she didn't question him or take offense to his text.

He waited for her response before making a decision of where he was going. He didn't have to wait long. *I'm worried you would be very distracting.*

It pulled a chuckle from his throat. And it also brought all of his hormones back to the surface. When did she become so *sexual?* Or was he that deprived that since his body knew his chance was coming, that was all he could think about?

Instead of playing along, he said, *Just stay safe, alright?*

Just like he had been wishing for, she replied a moment later. *I'm going to be with my dad. So please. Don't worry.*

It felt like a huge weight had been lifted off his chest. Why he felt the need to involve himself so deeply in her life, he thought was natural, but maybe it wasn't. Was it? She clearly could have a day to herself to do her own thing, but was it rude to ask for details? Had she been pressured into telling him she wasn't going to be alone to put him at ease?

He figured she would have ignored him had he crossed a line. He also figured it was something to look more into in his free time, or talk to her about directly.

Knowing Makoto was safe, Ren finished his journey back home. He didn't really have any plans for that day, and he needed to finish up

some last minute assignments for school next week. He also wanted to check his inventory to make sure his team was ready for the end of the palace. With Makoto being distracted with something else, he thought today would be a good day to stock up on supplies. While he was out, he could check on some of his other confidants, see what they had been up to, distract himself for once. After all, the end to Sae's palace was in sight, and he had to be mentally prepared for anything, and to be a support for Makoto in case anything abnormal happened.

But when he got back to Leblanc, "abnormal" happened.

Futaba barreled into him, nearly knocking him off balance. The only reason he didn't fall over had been his quick reflexes to grab the nearby barstool that magically held him up. A second later, Ren lifted his head to find Sojiro, furious, and waving something in his right hand.

A calling card.

The same one they had given to Futaba.

"Futaba! Tell me what the hell is going on!"

Ren's heart sank into his stomach, all of his earlier thoughts and plans for the day disappearing as if they were never there. Sojiro rushed to stand in front of him, his eyes glaring down at Futaba as she moved around him. It was hard trying to think of something to say to a man he had been so kind to him for so long. It was even harder trying to think of something to say to him that wouldn't get him or Futaba in trouble. Would Sojiro care if he came out and told him the truth? He loved Futaba, but would he turn him over to the police because he didn't feel a connection with him?

For the meantime, Ren held up his hands to try and calm Sojiro. "What's going on?"

Playing dumb didn't do him any favors. Sojiro's glare turned to him. "What the hell is this?" He held up the calling card, and it was difficult to maintain eye contact with the seething man in front of him. "Did you know about this?"

If he lied, Sojiro would find out the truth in the end, and he would be worse off. He could tell him the truth, but where would that put him, or Futaba? Or his friends?

Ren felt Futaba stir behind him, her grip on his jacket the all-telling sign she was nervous. “T-They saved…they saved me!”

Instead of firing off a retort, Sojiro sighed angrily. “Is this why you’ve come out of hiding?” There was a silence that was uncomfortable before Sojiro met his eyes again. “Are you one of them?”

It was the direct question Ren was hoping he wouldn’t ask. There were only two answers: yes or no. There was no middle ground, no wiggle room, no *buts.* It hadn’t been difficult at all to *lie* to Sae when she had asked him point-blank a few days ago. And while he respected Makoto’s relationship with her, lying to Sojiro was going to ultimately crush him.

He thought he was going to suffocate standing in the middle of the café. It didn’t help that Futaba clung to him like he would protect her from a secret that perhaps they should have told him about weeks ago.

It also tore at his heart because this was a man who he looked up to. Another father figure. He should trust him. Sure his freedom was very much on the line *again* , and Sojiro was gruff and callous most days, but he was a good guy. He was just surprised and angry about the fact no one told him…

…Right?

…How did Makoto deal with this revelation when she finally came clean to her parents?

“Ren.”

He had been hesitating long enough that Sojiro likely already knew the truth. But it didn’t make it any easier to accept, or look into his eyes, or open his mouth and *say* it. However, he had to. Lying would only get him deeper into trouble.

“Y-Yes…”

Sojiro didn't really react to the news. He just continued to stand in front of him, glaring at him, but admitting as much took the breath out of Ren. "I'm sorry I haven't said anything. But-,"

"All this time…"

Oh god. He was about to snap. He was about to put everything together and all of his friends would be arrested. He would never see the light of day again. Futaba would never get her answers…

"I asked them to do this!" Futaba came around from behind him, stomping her foot into the ground, her eyes filled with angry tears. "Had it not been for them, I would still be crying in my room feeling *sorry* for myself when I did nothing wrong! My mother was killed. And they brought me out of that state of mind to find out the truth!"

Seeing Futaba so upset, so raw with emotion, did a number on his heart. It also wiped the scowl off of Sojiro's face. The older man brought a hand to the back of his head, suddenly looking much older than Ren had ever seen him. "I don't understand this…"

Ren took the initiative to speak for Futaba. "It's not something that's easy to explain."

"Mom was looking into all of this," Futaba continued for him when Sojiro shot him a look to cut him off. Hearing her quiet voice, Sojiro once again lost the glare and his face softened when he looked back over at her. "It's why she was killed. I-I know things are…w-weird, b-but I have to…t-to do this."

When Sojiro sighed heavily, Ren thought he was coming to terms with the situation. He may not appreciate it, and Ren still didn't know what the future was going to hold for him right now, but it was something. Something positive.

"So please," Futaba added. "Please don't turn us in."

In a rare moment, Ren watched her drop her head, clap her hands together in front of her, and bow to Sojiro. The older man even seemed taken back by her actions. However, it was a tense several moments of silence, and in that time, he started to panic.

What if Futaba's plea wasn't good enough?

What if Sojiro was still upset with him and turned *him* in?

What if Sojiro kicked him out if he saw him as a violent person?

"Are you working with those adults, too?"

At the moment, Sojiro didn't seem eager to kick him out or turn him into the authorities. But how much would he be able to tell Sojiro without causing tension amongst his friends, or his allies? How much did Sojiro trust Mitsuru and Sanada? Would he be surprised to find out they were all working together?

"Papa Sanada is looking into Mom's case." Futaba clapped her hands again with a trace of her usual cheeriness. "Thanks to him, no one is gonna get away with anything!"

Sojiro looked taken aback. "Papa?"

Ren braved cracking a smile, but Futaba rocked back and forth on her heels with a playful grin. "He's all of our papa's! So don't worry! You'll always be *my* dad!"

There was a look on Sojiro's face that Ren couldn't place. Sojiro slowly found his way to a nearby barstool and took a seat, that look never fading. Futaba seemed anxious off to his side, possibly worried Sojiro had taken something the wrong way. A minute later, Sojiro looked over to the two of them, appearing tired and worn out. Ren sadly couldn't blame him.

But Sojiro said nothing.

"I know this is a surprise, but we're doing this for the greater good." Ren took a step forward. "I met this strange shadow being when I first arrived. I unknowingly found out about Kamoshida's abuse and had to put a stop to it. Everyone we've met along the way has been helping us figure out what's really going on." He turned his eyes to Futaba. "And helping Futaba was one of the best things we could have done. Her heart and her knowledge is what's keeping us going right now."

He could have sworn he saw a blush on Futaba's face before she looked away.

When he heard Sojiro sigh again, Ren waited patiently for him to speak up. "And what happens if you get caught, huh? Everyone thinks you murdered a man in cold blood. They will see you hang for this, and you will get no answers, no justice, no… *anything."*

It was hard to hear him sound so dejected. It also made Ren remember that Sojiro *knew* Futaba's mother and probably left his government job because of the corruption. How much *did* he know? And how close was he to Futaba's mother? Did he really think that no one could stop anyone with power? Had that been why he chose to lay low and run a coffee shop on the edge of the city?

But Ren would never forget who he was working with. He knew what his team was capable of. They all had their strong suits. They all worked together. They all wanted to help. He also knew he could rely on the older group for just as much support. With Mitsuru and her endless resources, anything was possible.

And he would never forget that day in Kaneshiro's club, when he watched from his corner of the room, petrified, as Sanada kept fighting and fighting in the amount of pain he was in…

"Then I want to prove you wrong," Ren said through the silence. His eyes met Sojiro's with much more confidence than he had shown since being cornered. "I've seen what people can do when they work together. We're not alone. We will see this through. We will get those answers, that justice, because *anything* is possible."

Another long sigh came from Sojiro as he slumped over in his chair. "You're children."

Ren was touched at his concern. Trying to convince him that they would all be okay just wasn't something he really had the ability to do. Not on the spot anyway. And not to someone who wasn't in on them being the Phantom Thieves.

So, he tried to break the tension with a smirk. "That's really nice of you to care about me."

He worried it was going to blow up in his face when Sojiro narrowed his eyes at him, but then Futaba jumped in her spot with a Futaba-like laugh. “Yeah! We are not just children! We’re *your* children! Smart. Stylish. Pretty much perfect! No one can stop us!”

Sojiro leaned into one of his hands, but Ren thought he saw his lips turn upwards. “I knew there was something special about you. Both of you. And that group of kids you bring over here.”

This time, Ren breathed out a laugh, relieved to know everything he was worried about could now be laid to rest. “I wouldn’t be here right now had you not given me a chance.”

“Just promise me one thing.” Sojiro reached into his pocket for his pack of cigarettes, but the tone in his voice made Ren tense once again. “Promise me that you guys will be safe. This isn’t a problem children should have to solve. But knowing who your allies are, I guess I can’t tell you to look the other way.”

Ren almost fell over in relief. He should have known Sojiro was on their side. He could have turned them in the second he found the calling card, but he chose to figure out what was going on. He probably would have done the same thing had one of his friends’ names been on a piece of paper written by people who supposedly killed someone.

But his earlier thoughts gave way to curiosity. “Why did you leave your job to start a coffee shop?”

Sojiro took a deep inhale of his cigarette. For a minute or two, he said nothing, and Ren thought it was too personal of a question to ask. Futaba rocked back and forth on her feet, just as anxious for his answer as he was.

“She warned me.” He inhaled again. Ren and Futaba waited as patiently as he thought they could. “She warned me that something could happen to her. People were asking too many questions, making too many uninvited trips to her lab. I never got the chance to ask her for details, and I refused to stand by and listen to them talk about her like they knew her after her passing. This was the farthest I could go to get away from them while being able to fight for

custody of Futaba."

Before either Futaba or him could say anything, Sojiro added, "I'm sorry, Futaba. I should have pressed her for more information. I could have helped her. I could have *saved* her."

Futaba jumped right into Sojiro without another word. The action touched his heart. It was hard to forget that all of them were suffering from their own problems, but they were all working together to help one another. They always came out on top. They always became stronger. Anything they faced in the future would make them even better.

Ren grew slightly more uncomfortable as the two of them sat in each other's arms. While he looked up to Sojiro, he wasn't his father. This was Futaba's moment, and he thought it best to give them both their space.

Sojiro stopped him. "You thanked me earlier for giving you the chance to be here." For the first time since his move to Tokyo, Ren caught a genuine smile from the older man. "Thank you, for giving me Futaba back."

Futaba pulled away from Sojiro, then he placed a hand on both of their shoulders. "Neither of you may have my blood, but I'll always see you both as my kids." Then, Sojiro smacked them both over the head. "Even if you're a bunch of troublemakers."

"So don't worry, Dad!" Futaba said with a bounce to her step. "You can count on us to find out what really happened so Mom doesn't have to worry about you worrying too much!"

Ren smiled as he watched Sojiro's face soften at her words. "Well, I don't know what I can do to help out, but as long as you're here, you're safe."

As Sojiro walked around the bar to begin preparing for the dinner crowd, Ren turned to Futaba, who wore a brilliant grin. "So. I guess I'm your big bro now, huh?" He smirked at her. "Guess this means you have to obey my every command."

Futaba pushed him with a scowl. “And I guess it’s my job to be annoying and post all about your secret affair with a certain someone whose dad could murder you.”

And just like that, Ren no longer felt safe in Sojiro’s café.

Chapter 151

Chapter 151

You can do this.

It had been a long few days. Between her confrontation with Eiko and Tsukasa and knowing the end of Sae's palace was approaching, her pessimistic side started to win over her thoughts. She couldn't help Eiko because she didn't *want* her help. Would she be able to help Sae, since Makoto was sure her sister wouldn't want her help either?

Mitsuru and Fuuka had been over the past few nights as well, going over last-minute details to get their plan underway. Which led Makoto to where she currently was, hiding in the student council room, shaking.

They would reach Sae's treasure room that night. Ren had told her they were close, and they needed to go that day in case a new surprise caught them off guard. His argument made sense, and Makoto knew the sooner she got this over with, the sooner Sae would be back to her normal self. Her family could rest easy. *She* could rest easy.

But would it be that easy? Sae was strong all her own. She was smart, determined, and her *sister.* Makoto had fought her dad back in Mementos, proven to him *and* herself that she could fight family if that would save them. She knew she would be worried, anxious, and doubtful right until she had to physically fight…

She was pathetic. And maybe that's what Eiko meant when she told her that she would never know what it was like to be anything other than a teacher's pet, the school's saint, the picture-perfect child who never had any problems. While Makoto knew that her problems were far different than Eiko's, it still hurt. Eiko was her friend, someone she tried to help save from a dangerous man.

So what would Sae do? Would she call her names in front of her

friends, tell her she was a terrible sister who couldn't do *anything* right? A child so dependent on her parents, her friends, that she would never be her own person?

"Hey you."

Makoto jumped back in her seat, the papers she had on the table in front of her thrown off to the side. She should have known Ren would come find her after her bizarre behavior the other day, given she had been oddly "playful" with him that week.

She was a terrible girlfriend. Along with being a terrible friend. And a terrible sister.

"O-Oh, h-hi, Ren."

He said nothing as he crossed the room to pull out the closest chair and take a seat. Makoto took the time to grab the papers she had spent time grading and made one, clean stack. Ren still hadn't said a word once she was finished, but she could feel his eyes on her, a common tactic her dad used when he waited for her to talk.

But what would she tell him? That her friendship with Eiko was over because she couldn't convince her to ditch a criminal? That she was *still* scared they would fail in Sae's palace? That maybe she wasn't half the person she gave herself credit for, or her friends thought she was…

"You're super cute, you know."

Makoto was taken back by his comment, until she realized it was a very Ren-like thing to do to break tension. Instead of growing flustered at it, she lowered her hand and brought both of them to her lap. "I'm sorry."

It was the only thing she could think of to say. She really was sorry for everything. She was sorry she was weak, that he had to take the initiative to talk to her when she wanted to hide, that she couldn't be helpful when people expected it from her.

She felt a light pressure on her upper arm. As she expected, Ren was trying to reach her, to make her feel better, but if anything, his

sad expression left her feeling *worse.* She didn't say anything to him. He didn't say anything to her. And the longer the silence dragged on, the more her anger and self-hatred pulled at her heart until she was sure there were tears in her eyes.

"Makoto."

Her hands flew up to her face, but Ren was quick to grab her wrists and pull them away. The sorrowful look he wore seconds ago had been replaced with something more serious. His eyes were sharp, his tone had been sharp, and for once, Makoto thought he was finally going to snap at her for always being *pathetic.*

"Stop trying to shoulder every little thing by yourself. I know you're scared. I know you're worried. I know you don't want us to think you're cracking, but maybe what you don't know is that we *know.* Haru especially knows. The only person you're fooling here is yourself. So stop it."

All of her emotions crashed in the pit of her stomach and she was suddenly angry. She pushed her chair back, pulling her arms out of Ren's hands. "I *have* to be better than this. I *have* to save my sister, but I can't even save my friend. So how do I know I can save her?! My family will be destroyed forever! I'll never be able to face my dad, or my mom, or my sister, or-,"

He kissed her. Out of nowhere. She hadn't even noticed him getting out of his chair or approaching her or reaching out to her or getting that close to her. While the initial contact shocked her, it only lasted a second. Her brain continued to run a million doubts in her head, but she felt herself relaxing against him. Eventually, he calmed her down to the point she had no thoughts at all. Just him, his lips, the softness in which he held her and kissed her, and it left her feeling fuzzy and weak.

When he separated himself from her, she missed him terribly. Her hands instinctively grabbed his shirt, desperate for that familiar warmth and comfort again. Arms wrapped around her shoulders, encasing her in a bubble of trust and solitude, and him.

"Trust me," he whispered into her hair, dropping another kiss to the

side of her head. “I know how it feels to be lost. To be scared. To hate yourself so much that you push everyone away. But ever since meeting you, and the others, I feel like I am stronger as a person. And when I’m with you, like this, I’m not afraid. I’m not weak. I’m practically invincible.”

Despite her earlier breakdown, she found herself chuckling at his statement. “D-Don’t say that.”

He released a breathless laugh that made her fall against him completely. “I mean it, though.” His arms tightened around her, as if sensing she was losing strength and she needed him to hold her up. “Because I will fight through anything as long as I get to hold you again.”

She found herself tearing up for a different reason. “I-I really am happy to have you in my life, Ren.”

“There she is.” He leaned away from her, but she was too embarrassed to meet his eyes. Regardless, she could feel his smile. “I know you like to be independent, but let me be your strength when you’re weak. Let me be your light when you’re trapped in the darkness of your mind. Okay?”

Finally, she found the courage to look up at him. His eyes were warm, the smile he wore was genuine, he looked so happy, yet peaceful. All of those tiny, pesky thoughts about not knowing what love was and if she was in love with Ren were quickly put to rest. If this feeling wasn’t love, then she was pretty sure it didn’t exist.

“I hope one day that you find a great guy who is willing to look at you the same way your father can still look at me.”

“T-Thank you, Ren…” She felt so much better, and in a way, she knew things would be fine. And when she started slipping again, Ren would be there for her.

He pulled her back into him for another hug, then the sound of the bell rang through the school. “Tomorrow, I want to make you dinner. I want you to think about nothing. No school. No friends. No family. Well, maybe me, a little,” he added with a smirk. “And we will have a

fresh mind for the final fight."

Makoto inhaled deeply, trying to savor his aura for as long as she could. "Yes. That sounds wonderful."

Again, his smile seemed to warm her in the comforting way she had come to appreciate. That smile started to turn more and more sly as they walked out of the room and to the staircase. He never made a move for her hand until they reached the second floor. The look in his eyes borderlined serious and devious, and she felt her face heat up.

"You know, I didn't tell you that I wasn't able to focus in class the other day because of you." He took a step closer to her, causing her back to straighten. He leaned to hover over her ear, her heart pounding erratically in her chest. "So I may need a lot of *studying* to keep my grades up."

Before she could even think of anything to reply with (not that she would have), he smirked at her and headed towards his classroom. Makoto stood in the hallway looking like a fool, face red and mind crashing, until someone put a hand on her shoulder.

"You alright?"

She managed to keep her scream in her throat, then turned to find Ken eyeing her curiously. "O-Oh! U-Um…y-yes!"

He either thought nothing of her odd behavior or worse, *knew* why she was acting the way she was. The grin that turned his lips made her worry the latter. "Better get running if you want to make it to class on time, Niijima-san."

Without another word, she did just that. She really hoped that Ken didn't know why she had spaced out, what was going through her head, but it still paled in comparison to Ren's words. How could he say something like that with such a straight face?

Then again, he probably thought the same when she had left him standing in the staircase a few days ago.

At least she was feeling better, even if she was the last one to take

her seat in the classroom, earning some unwanted glances from those she sat next to.

The rest of the school day passed painfully and slowly, but it passed. Ren sent her a few messages, each with a simple comment that her mind took the wrong way (or the way Ren wanted her to take it) and she failed to focus in class. Just when she was able to shake the embarrassment of one message, he would send her another.

Are you thinking about me? ;)

Class sucks. I wish I could just study with you. :)

Help! My girlfriend is super-hot and I can't focus in class!

She managed to ignore them, as flustered as they made her. But once class was over, she mustered up the courage to try and say something witty back. It wasn't in her nature, and she worried about his retaliation, but she *had* to try.

Plus, while she would never admit it, it was kind of fun. Challenging. Rewarding (if successful). Distracting.

But just when she had something in her mind to type out in a message, her phone went off in her hand. It wasn't from Ren, or any of her friends.

It was from Akechi. *I hope we are still planning on wrapping up the palace today.*

Makoto groaned. Why did he always have to bother her at the worst possible times? It was extremely annoying. However, she found herself responding with, *Of course.*

Wonderful. While Akechi wasn't in the same room as her, she could still see the dark smirk on his face. *We are so close to saving her, Makoto. I will not let you down.*

That was when she realized he wasn't texting all of them, but just her specifically. The only time he had done that had been when he told her he would be attending the culture festival. The fact he was

contacting her directly only meant that he was trying to get under her skin. To remind her that the end was near.

She didn't bother to reply to him and pushed herself to her feet. Ren's earlier words were her lifeline. He didn't expect her to do anything, and she knew she could rely on him when she felt it necessary. And she would, because she knew better than to pretend she wasn't still scared and anxious and asking herself a million questions.

She waited at the entrance to the school lobby for Ren so they could walk to the station together. In the meantime, she waved to a few classmates, told Ryuji and Ann that they would meet at the courthouse, and tried to ignore the cheesy and knowing grin Haru wore as she walked out of the school.

As soon as she thought she was alone, someone came up behind her and dropped their hands to her shoulder. Knowing it was Ren, she brought her elbow back into his stomach, not too hard, but enough to feel it. He released her with a surprised grunt, and she turned to face him with a satisfied smile.

"I would advise you not to sneak up behind me."

Ren held a hand over his stomach, but he didn't look at all intimidated. "Or maybe I like when you beat me up."

Honestly, she would never understand him. "You won't like it when it hurts."

He chuckled. "Or I will."

Makoto thought it best to ignore the conversation and head down the street to the station. Ren didn't stop her or pick the conversation back up, and she was grateful. She wasn't one who could come up with something clever in the heat of the moment. Texting at least offered her time to think, change her mind, push through her embarrassment knowing he wasn't physically there.

"Ah, so you *did* think of me all afternoon." Ren came to stand at her side, and she couldn't help but roll her eyes at his cockiness.

“Sounds like maybe *you* need a study session more than I do.”

She felt her face heat up despite her best wishes. “M-Maybe I do…”

He reacted oddly, coming to a stop for a second, then he shook his head and smiled widely. “Let’s get through today then. I’ll make sure our first session is worth both our times.”

She nodded, not really thinking about what he had said until after she reacted. She was quick to look away from him, but she could hear him laugh softly at her. Thankfully for her, the rest of the walk to the station was done in silence, even if she could feel Ren’s eyes on her from time to time.

Once they were on the train heading to Kasumigaseki, he used the packed train to put his hands on her hips and pull her closer to him. She didn’t mind, as he usually held onto her when he could, but then she felt his hands move from her hips to her back, like he was trying to get a picture of how she would look…

She slammed her head into his chest, earning herself another groan from him. His hands stopped roaming at her lower back, but she was more worried she had hurt him rather than what his intentions had been.

She turned her head and rested against the spot she had struck him. “S-Sorry…”

“It’s alright. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

Makoto suddenly felt bad for stopping him. “I-I was just surprised.”

He held her tighter as the train went around a curve. “I might have pushed my luck.” At least he was at ease again, resting against her almost as much as she was against him. “You’re just super cute.”

“Stop it,” she chuckled into his chest, then they both fell into a peaceful silence. It left her in a daze, far too comfortable and content when she should be freaking out and crying in a dark room, alone. Maybe that was what Ren was talking about in the student council room. The peace she felt with him could eradicate all of her concerns and make her a better person. She suddenly felt bad for

anyone who *didn't* have this kind of connection with someone special.

…Like Eiko.

Was that really why she was so angry with her? Because she had Ren and she exposed Tsukasa when Eiko had clung to him for that same sense of security?

Those concerns were flushed from her mind when she met up with the others in front of the courthouse. Akechi was the first person she saw, a familiar twisted grin on his face, as he pushed himself off the bench he had been sitting on.

"It seems like this is everyone." He had a way of speaking that annoyed her, stating the obvious like no one else knew. Like he was the one in charge. "Shall we?"

As they all travelled into the Metaverse and up the elevators to the final floor, Makoto had to keep her distance from Ren. It was hard, given how much she had realized he helped her calm down, and now that security blanket was gone. Akechi at least seemed to be keeping his distance, for now. Ren continued to lead the group as he always did, making everything look easy, smooth, while being fearless himself.

A part of her envied him. Despite his mental state, he could focus and lead their team to safety and success like it was nothing. She was far too emotional to be any good at that. Even now, she was worried about her sister, what Akechi's true motives were, what would happen to her family…

She hadn't even realized she made a wrong turn until she felt a hand on her wrist. Makoto jerked back, ready to deliver a strike against a shadow or Akechi, and found the soft eyes of Haru piercing right through her.

"Everything is going to be okay, Queen." As much as she tried not to, she felt the tears sting the back of her eyes. Why was she acting so bizarre lately? From one opposite emotion to the next. It made no sense to her.

But she clung to Haru's hand like she would have Ren's. He had told her before that she could depend on them. She didn't always have to be strong for their sake. And Haru especially knew the struggles she was facing in the darkness of her own mind.

"Thank you," was all she was able to say to her friend, but Haru beamed at her regardless. She led her back to the group, who all stood before the counter of the next high stakes game. All she could think about was the maze, how terrified she had been, but oddly enough, she felt ready. Haru's grip on her hand and Ren's confidence from that day gave her something to hold on to.

They would all be okay. Sis would be okay. Her parents would be okay.

Thankfully, the high stakes game was a one-on-one fight, so Makoto was able to breathe easy. Ren would be fine, since his ability to summon several personas would be beneficial against any enemy. Plus, as much as she wanted to be the person to pummel some shadow's face in, Ren wouldn't let her. Or any of them.

He really was something else.

"If my body is so mangled and damaged in the fight, I nominate you to lead the pack." Ren smiled madly as he approached her, but his joke didn't make her laugh. However, instead of glaring at him and telling him as much, she rolled her eyes.

"Then I'll make someone heal you." She heard Ren's chuckle, but he never stopped walking until he literally stood in front of her. He used his hand to turn her face to his, and he didn't speak to her until her eyes met his.

And that damn grin was back. Despite herself, she found herself blushing. "Maybe an award is in place then?"

Worried there were eyes watching them, she gently pushed him away. It also helped cool her down so she could *think*. "T-Then you better win…" It was a terrible comeback, but in the presence of friends (she knew Haru was giggling behind her hand), she didn't have much else to say on the spot.

Ren simply put his hands in his pockets, the smile never leaving his face. “If I get a cut, will you kiss it to make it better?”

He was really good at poking the fire. She was terrible at playing along. “Fine.”

Somehow, he seemed just as ecstatic as he would have been if she promised to cook him dinner. He lifted a hand to his heart and bowed deeply to her, embarrassing her even more. “Then I will fight for your honor, my Queen.”

The fight itself was what she had hoped *wouldn’t* happen. Of course there would be a twist to the rules. Sae’s shadow had made that perfectly clear from the very beginning. Every challenge had been in favor of Sae. She was foolish for thinking this fight would be a cake walk.

But no matter how many times she thought Ren was down, he got back up. When he was hurt, he held his ground. Watching him fight battle after unnecessary battle was heart wrenching, but she was unable to look away. It was impressive to say the least, and she desperately wanted to run down to the stage and help him, but at the same time, she didn’t.

It reminded her of her dad, back in Kaneshiro’s club, fighting against people who wanted to kill them, battered and beaten, but refusing to stay down. It had been a terrifying night with terrifying consequences, some that would scar her for life.

Yet watching Ren stand back up after taking a dangerous hit left her more in awe than in fear. She felt like a horrible girlfriend for not freaking out and arguing over the fairness of the challenge. Whether or not that was her heart saying everything would be fine, or if that was her body entering a state of shock, she didn’t know.

It wasn’t until it was all over that she was able to breathe again. There was a pat on her back, a small sign from Haru that she may have been more tense than she thought, but all was well again. Each of them breathed a sigh of relief, Ryuji going as far as screaming at the desk clerk for lying to them and almost getting his best buddy killed.

She figured Ren would be far too injured and tired to be his playful self, but he proved her wrong. He lifted his hand toward her, showing off a nasty cut to his hand he suffered by being defensive, and smiled at her.

“I’m hurt.” He moved his hand up and down, as if trying to remind her of her promise. “I think I might die if I don’t get the magical remedy I hear you possess.”

Without even thinking, or knowing what she was doing, she barreled into him, nearly knocking him off his feet. Her arms wrapped around him as her face pressed against his chest. She doubted she was crying, but it was hard to tell with the giant rush of emotion that just hit her out of the blue.

He was warm. He was alive. He was an *asshole* for playing off his injuries like they were nothing. But he was alive, and nothing else mattered to her.

Ren didn’t say anything to her, choosing instead to return her embrace much more lightly than she was holding him. She hoped he wasn’t worried about her being worried over him, because she was really more *relieved* than upset. With how the past few days had been for her, his strength she physically saw in action was exactly what she needed to see.

“I’m okay, Makoto. I promise.”

His voice was soft, a sign that maybe she owed him an explanation, so she slowly started to separate herself from him. She looked up at him without hesitation, something that appeared to catch him off guard, then she grabbed his injured hand and lifted it to her lips.

“I will gladly heal all your wounds for you.”

The sparkle in his eyes set a new fire in her heart. No matter what challenge awaited her in the very near future, as long as he was at her side, she would face anything.

Chapter 152

Chapter 152

They did it.

They had finally reached the treasure room.

He just wished it could have been a relief.

If anything, he was more tense about what would happen next.

Akechi had been very cooperative as of late. He had barely said anything to Makoto, and if he did, it was nothing that fired her up like he would often do at the beginning of their infiltration. Makoto's friends had been keeping track of his movements, but Ren worried they were also beginning to doubt Akechi's motives. While catching the "culprit" was one of the purposes of the investigation, he feared there were still more questions than answers.

Mitsuru at least seemed to be up to something. She told him in a message that they were going to head into the palace the following night since they were only waiting to issue a calling card, at Akechi's request. She hadn't elaborated on what they were doing exactly, but he trusted her. With Futaba and Fuuka's help, Akechi had been tracked expertly, which had put him at ease long ago.

But still, there was a feeling in his stomach he couldn't place when he was around Akechi. And with the accusation of him being the one in the black mask ringing just as loudly in his head as the day he first heard it, he knew it wasn't *good.* Whether or not that meant Akechi was on to them, or postponing his operation, or really innocent, he didn't know.

What he *did* know was that Makoto was super cute and had promised to take care of all his cuts and scrapes and he was happy to get her out of the palace and away from Akechi for a few days and all to himself again.

He didn't have the heart to joke about how they could have "quality time" together after school the next day. He was worried that seeing the treasure room might have sparked a new wave of emotional turmoil in her. So while he stood by her side in silence, he was just happy to know she wasn't dragging her feet or keeping her eyes on the ground. In fact, she looked energetic and proud and cute…

"I know you probably think I'm worried, and you're right." Her quiet voice cut right through his thoughts, but he focused on her intently. "I'm scared. In a few days, I'm going to find out if all this preparation has been worth it. I'm sure the what ifs are going to be more loud and prominent in my dreams, my thoughts…"

He almost made a move to stand in front of her and stop her, but she turned to him first. His words caught in his throat when he noticed the small smile on her face, the serenity in her eyes, the confident aura he sensed from her. "But I'll face them all. Because I have you."

His mind failed to kick into gear, leaving him staring at her like an idiot. Makoto was usually more thoughtful than she gave herself credit for, but she had been a little down with the target on her sister's back. One day, she would be normal. The next, she would be leaving *him* embarrassed. Then, the following day, she was upset, scared, lost. But seeing the shine to her features after what he figured would have been the beginning of a downward spiral elated him.

What felt like minutes later, Ren finally had the ability to breathe out a laugh. "Wow. I…I don't know what to say." He ran a hand through his hair, trying to tone down the heat he knew was rising to his face. "I thought for sure you were still so disappointed in the way I fought in your name."

Her smile stretched across her face. "You could be better, but you're alive. I'm sure you'll be more than happy to let me train you to be a proper fighter."

When her hand found his, he was quick to tug on her until she landed against him. He wrapped an arm around her back and pressed his lips into her hair. "I would *love* to be your pupil. So long

as you don't go easy on me. I learn better that way."

He felt her laugh against his chest and it sent a shockwave through his body. He couldn't even think of the last time he felt so powerful, yet so at ease in his entire life. A part of him didn't want to leave that very spot, even if it was an odd spot to stand around. He was just so content and happy, and he knew life was about to happen and take that precious moment away from him for a day or two.

"Well, my dad always said the first step to becoming strong is to eat well." Makoto leaned her head back, which made him look down to her. Her eyes sparkled in the light and his knees almost gave out from under him. "And you have promised me dinner."

There was a playful jest in her tone that made him swallow, hard. She was undeniably attractive right now, hinting at their earlier arrangement for "study lessons", or at least, he thought. The way she pulled on his hand to get him moving, like she was becoming impatient, almost had *him* stepping into a secluded alleyway and giving into his desires.

But he wouldn't. Because she deserved better. And so help him god if her sister found the two of them together in an alley…

The dark and bloody scenario he painted in his mind curbed his hormones for the time being. He was a little nervous (and extremely relieved) when Makoto didn't drag him out of Shibuya Station and to a small diner or some random restaurant and headed to his next line instead. However, the images in his head started to become a little *too* tantalizing and he was positive Makoto picked up on his body language.

He just knew very little about being *intimate* with a pretty girl, or any girl. Kissing was about as far as he would get before he freaked himself out and focused on an entirely new topic. He was too afraid to ask Makoto how far *she* had gone with another guy, because she was a pretty girl, but one that likely didn't have the chance to think about being with someone.

That or her dad murdered them, which was still a serious concern for him. And since Sanada frequented the coffee shop and knew

they were dating, would he assume typical teenage boy behavior and murder him before he got the chance to touch her?

…Why was he even thinking all of this?

“Are you okay?”

And now he had to answer for his behavior. “Honestly, I’m really nervous.” A hand brushed through the back of his head, trying to keep him from overheating. “I-I know we’ve talked about this before, but this is all new to me. I-I don’t want to do something…stupid.”

Hearing Makoto’s soft laughter made him feel so much better. “It’s okay, Ren. We can just…take it slow.”

It also did wonders for his heart knowing she was the person in control when he was losing his mind. He continued to hold onto her hand as they exited the train at Yongen-Jaya. His heart beat frantically in his chest, but the longer he focused on her hand, his guiding light in a world of haze, he was able to keep himself well enough together in public.

They entered Leblanc to find an empty café, minus one lone customer. Sojiro sat at the end of the bar with his newspaper and cigarette, but gave him an eye when the door closed behind them. Knowing Sojiro was accepting of his friends and what they were doing, he did his best to ignore the look and walked further inside.

“If you wind up dead, kid, I know nothing.”

Sojiro flipped his paper like he hadn’t said anything, but Ren exhaled a breath and pulled Makoto along with him. “I’m just trying to have a nice dinner.”

He heard a chuckle from the end of the bar. “Your last?”

Beside him, Makoto lowered her head to hide the blush coming to her features. Ren again did his best to ignore Sojiro’s comment and offered to take Makoto’s jacket before she took a seat. He didn’t know if Sojiro knew they were dating, but given he was either with friends or solely with her, he was sure he put two and two together.

“If I’m dead, you can’t use me as an alibi when Futaba starts dating and you kill her boyfriend.”

His joke earned a laugh from Makoto and a hard stare from Sojiro over his glasses. However, the older man returned his attention to his paper. “Children.”

It was the tension breaker Ren didn’t know he needed. Sojiro may have been upset with him the other day about the calling card, but it wasn’t until then that he knew it was behind them. It allowed him to focus on showing off his cooking to a girl he wanted desperately to impress. He didn’t know how great of a cook she was, but she struck him as the type who would blow him away in a competition. He had to make his first impression stick, or she would hold it over his head until he died.

“Would you like any help?”

Ren grabbed his apron and shook his head. “You just relax. I plan on putting on a spectacular show.”

Another dry cackle came from Sojiro, but Makoto smiled at him, and that was all that mattered.

Sadly for him, his spectacular show was more of a spectacular disaster. He thought making broth for soba would be easy, like his book made it seem, but every little thing that could have gone wrong, went wrong. Trying to show off, his hand slipped on the bottle of soy sauce he was tossing in the air and it shattered on the ground. While cleaning up the mess, the small pot on the stove with the noodles started to boil over, making an even bigger mess. And while rummaging through the kitchen for an alternative for the soy sauce, he forgot to turn the heat off and the noodles were cooked *too* well, literally sticking to the pot when he tried to dish it out.

Sojiro found the entire thing humorous, stabbing his wounded pride by telling him there was plenty of curry in the fridge he could heat up.

Makoto stood from her seat and rounded the corner, likely to offer her help cleaning up what he was now too ashamed to finish. But

when he felt a warmth on his hand, he cast a look at her. She leaned against his arm, her lips turned upwards in a soft smile. It was beautiful to see. “That was a wonderful show, Ren.”

Any other time, he might have belittled himself, but he was far too drawn into her to say anything. It was cute that she was willing to come to his defense over something as mundane as cooking (failing to cook really), and it touched his heart. And maybe, deep down, it was a sign. She would have tasted his best attempt and been disgusted, had he been successful. Sticking to curry was probably for the best.

“Can’t say I’m pleased with myself. I’m sure you’d put me to shame.”

She chuckled against him, then pulled away from him. “I’m afraid I’m not one for juggling bottles of liquid while cooking.”

She was like a completely different person. Cheerful and playful. It was enthralling and likely dangerous, since she was able to leave him speechless and numb now with a look. Was she doing it on purpose? He didn’t see her as a devious person. Then again, he knew her mother…

He had to clear his throat before he could speak. “Curry is a staple here. Shouldn’t have even tried to make something else in this kitchen.”

It took him a few minutes to finish prepping Sojiro’s homemade meal (he made Ren tell her that), then he took the seat next to her. His mind wandering again, he tried to ease some of the building excitement in his stomach by starting a conversation. “So. What kind of movies do you like? I have a few upstairs we could watch.”

He doubted there would really be any “watching”, but it gave him an excuse to have Makoto up in his room with Sojiro around. It was also a good fall back in case either of them freaked out and got cold feet. He also didn’t know, and he wanted to know everything he could about her.

But when she slowly lowered her spoon to her plate, that excitement turned into dread. “I can’t say I’m a fan of scary movies. My sister

kind of ruined them for me as a child."

He wanted to laugh, to say something in regards to how cute it would be to scare her, too, but the happiness was gone. It was a stab to his heart. "I didn't mean to bring this up."

Makoto shook her head. "No, it's okay. Sis would love to sit me down and tell me it was a new Buchimaru movie, and she was very good at convincing me to continue to watch them for him to appear."

A sad smile came to her face, and it took a lot of restraint not to reach out and grab her hand. "She would laugh and laugh while I screamed and ran to my mom in tears after a particularly frightening scene. My mom would scold her, and grounded her once, but then my dad played middle-man and helped me scare her a few times."

The ease in which she was speaking to him about old family memories left him in another haze. He was able to hear her words at least, but it was like she was reading him a story, and he was thrown head-first into it like he was there.

He just braced himself for the ending. "She was a wonderful sister. She still is. A part of me wants to finish her palace to find out why she truly lost her mind. If she had a palace back when she left the house, then why didn't the man with the black mask go after her years ago? And if she gave birth to the palace recently, what happened to make her this angry?"

She sighed next to him. "Everyone might see her as a spiteful cheater, but she cares so much about my family, about me, about her job. She's just forced herself into this corner and she feels like she's trapped." He saw her steel her eyes ahead of her, and he knew her next words before she said them. "I'm going to save her." She turned her eyes to him. "And I'll be counting on you for support."

He couldn't reach over and kiss her without drawing Sojiro's attention, so he offered her a smile instead. "Of course."

There was a comfortable silence that fell around both of them. The only sounds came from the quiet conversations of the few other patrons and the TV off in the corner. Ren was tempted to ask

Makoto to talk more about her past, especially any embarrassing stories about her as a child. She also seemed to be happy sharing some of the better times, and he thought that maybe she would continue if he asked her to.

Instead, his thoughts ran back to when her sister had approached him in the station before school. “You know, your sister stopped me once to ask about my record.” Makoto tensed beside him, but he continued with, “I was scared at first, but she seemed genuinely interested in my case.”

Makoto appeared confused at his confession, so he left off the fact Sae had asked him about being a Phantom Thief. She obviously didn’t think him a liar if she hadn’t had him arrested yet.

“When was this?”

He placed his spoon down on the edge of his bowl. “The other day.” Her eyes widened at that. “Never thought she would let me live if she ever cornered me alone. I guess she likes me, huh?”

He could tell she was off in her own little world, thinking. It was cute, and he lifted a finger to poke her straight in the forehead. Her face scrunched like it usually would. He had to fight a lot harder to keep himself from kissing her.

“You’re really cute.”

She shook her head. “Why would she be asking you about your record?”

“I don’t know,” he told her. “Maybe she’s doing it for someone she loves?”

Makoto fell back in her chair. He began to worry that maybe he shouldn’t have brought it up at all. “M-Maybe…My dad did say she was, I guess…changing.”

Hearing that made Ren’s heart skip a beat. There was hope. And he was so happy to know that everything would get better for her. Makoto would finally be truly happy. No more pain, or grief, or sadness over something she couldn’t control.

“And soon, we will give her the final push she needs.” His hand searched for one of hers. “Keep being strong, Makoto. We’re going to see this through.”

The smile she offered him started a fire in his soul. She was so beautiful. He was very much in love with her. He hoped that feeling would get them both through the darker days they may encounter soon.

“Thank you, Ren.” She squeezed his hand tightly. “I wouldn’t be able to keep going had you not been right here at my side.”

He counted his lucky stars that he had finished his meal and could head upstairs without looking like an ungrateful punk. Makoto followed suit, kindly thanking Sojiro for the food (which wounded his pride slightly), and Ren took their empty plates to the sink. He really hoped he didn’t come across as *desperate* when he took less than twenty seconds to clean their dishes, but no one commented or really noticed.

“We’ll be upstairs watching a movie if you need anything, Pops,” he added for good measure. Sojiro simply waved him off with a slight roll of his eyes. Ren only hoped he didn’t *know* where his true intentions fell.

Well, if he cared, he never said anything. He chalked that up as a win.

However, once he was upstairs, his mind began to run a little *too* fast. He was suddenly too nervous to sit down. Was he nervous? Or was this excitement on some level? Was he freaking Makoto out by his inability to sit still?

“S-So…” And now he was stuttering. He was going to scare Makoto away at this rate. “W-What movie do you, um…want to watch?”

He hoped she would pick a movie from his very small collection and spare him the embarrassment of speaking anymore. Hopefully there was a movie she was interested in. The only kind of movies he knew she *didn’t* like had been horror films. Did he have a good enough collection? He would go out and find a different one if she didn’t like

anything he had…

When he heard her laugh at him, his heart came to a blinding halt. Everything came back into focus when he felt her take his hand in hers. “A-Are you…nervous?”

He couldn’t help the burst of air that came out of his mouth. His free hand lifted to the back of his head. “Um, a little…”

“Don’t be.” She took a step into him. The rest of the world faded around him as he looked into her eyes. He barely registered her hand resting on the side of his face. “I-I love you, Ren.”

It took the breath out of him, but he welcomed it. She was the first one to lean into a kiss, and he was more than willing to let his emotions move his muscles instead of his brain. He pulled her as close to her as he could without squeezing the life out of her. Their kiss was nothing colorful, but it was just as wonderful as all the others. He smiled into some of the ones he started, so overcome with happiness and love that he couldn’t help himself. She would do the same whenever she initiated a new kiss.

He didn’t realize he was pushing her back towards his bed until she grabbed at his shirt for balance. A small wave of nervousness passed through his body, but her breathless laugh alleviated him. So, he kissed her again, trying to be very careful about balancing himself while supporting her as he brought her down to his bed. The second he was hovering over her, his hormones kicked into a different gear.

He had never felt like this in his entire life. He was literally *burning* . He couldn’t get enough of her. He applied more pressure to their kiss until there was no space left between their bodies. One arm supported his weight at the side of her head and the other found its natural spot on her hip. Makoto locked her arms around his neck, pulling him even closer to her, and a small part of him worried he was crushing her.

There was a moment of panic when the hand at her side managed to slip under her shirt. This had been as far as he went last time, but gods he couldn’t stop now. He would, if she told him to, but the

braver he got, the more she seemed to do the same.

In fact, she was trying to tug his shirt over his head long before he even pushed hers up at all. But he let her. Because he was on *fire* and the cooler air felt wonderful.

But then there was a little voice in the back of his head warning him to *slow down.* At the rate they were going, both of them would be completely undressed in minutes, and he wanted to appreciate her. Jumping right into having sex would be like smashing a hundred types of expensive and delicious sushi in three minutes without enjoying it…

Odd reference, but his mind was clearly focused on something else.

He grabbed her wrist when he felt her fingers running along his chest. She stilled under him, and as the seconds ticked by, the more she started to panic.

“It’s okay,” he assured her, planting a soft kiss to the side of her head. “I just…I want to slow down. I won’t be able to *study* you if you keep distracting me.”

Regardless of how *hot* he was from the implications, he treasured the blush on her face as she looked away from him. “S-Sorry…”

He kissed her, far less needy than the previous one. While he let her slowly take over the kiss, he began giving into his deepest desire to finally *touch* her. They had fought together once, back when she threw him on his back, so he knew she was in great shape and had a body to go with it. However, looking at her was *nothing* compared to how she felt. She had really soft skin. She wasn’t overly *ripped,* but his fingers could trace over the lines of her muscles...

…And there went his restraint.

At least he tried.

Without breaking away from her lips, Ren pulled back, wrapping his arms around her to keep her against him. Once she was sitting up, both of his hands grabbed the bottom of her shirt and began pulling it over her head. If she wanted to remind him that he was

contradicting his own words, she never said anything. It also helped to push him along instead of slowing things down.

Plus, feeling her skin on his skin was one of the greatest things he had ever felt in his life.

In all his dreams where he pictured this happening, he always stopped himself (or her) at this point. Thankfully they still had their pants on, and he was trying (and sadly, failing) to remove her bra, but he wasn't half as nervous as he imagined he would be. Not that he was really thinking about it, but he was impressed with himself. They might be a little too desperate, but there would be plenty of times to study together.

Assuming he didn't disappoint her.

…Would he? He'd like to think she would have stopped him or became much more distant if she truly felt that way. If anything, *she* was the one who was making all the first moves. *She* was the one who sat up enough to help him unhook her bra. *She* was the one whose hands wandered down to touch *him…*

Her touch was like a bucket of ice water being thrown on him and it paralyzed him. Makoto, likely thinking she had done something wrong, immediately pulled her hand away. "S-Sorry!"

Everything tossed around in his head and he couldn't *do* anything. He simply sat over her, struggling to catch his breath.

"I-I'm so sorry…"

The fear in her voice is what pulled him out of the icy waters of his own terror. Ren dropped his head to rest on top of hers and did his best to show her a decent smile. "N-No…it's okay. I just…uh, s-sorry."

He collapsed on top of her, ashamed and defeated and angry with himself. He should have kept to his word to take things *slow* . He should have known he was going to freak out if things went like this. And now, Makoto would probably never want to do it again.

Then, he felt something in his hair. Nice and soft and relaxing. "You

have really soft hair."

Ren burst out into laughter, slowly lifting himself up, but not enough for her to stop what she was doing. Just enough to look at her. "That was the cutest thing you could have possibly said right now."

"I-I'm not going to lie, I-I kind of always wondered how it would feel." One of his hands moved to cradle her face, running his thumb over her cheekbone. "It always looks so fluffy."

Gods did he love this girl. Even with both of them half-naked, she could talk to him like they were snuggled up on the couch. "I use a secret shampoo that gives it extra fluff. And it's worth the price if it gets your five-star approval."

She chuckled at him, and he was once again overcome with emotion that he pressed his lips against hers. She kept her hands in his hair. He kept his hands where they were. It was strange to have been so consumed with desire a minute or two ago when now, he was content with just a kiss and being close to her.

It was only a matter of time before their kiss grew slightly more intense. He was also very much aware that she didn't have a shirt on, and he'd be a fool not to *study* her now. It was hard as hell to listen to the voice in the back of his head, reminding him to slow down if he didn't want a repeat of what happened mere minutes ago. So while her hands left his hair to the back of his neck and his shoulders, his free hand left her face to *slowly* move down to her shoulder, down her side and to his favorite spot on her hip…

"Ren!"

Hearing his name yelled from the first floor was like a bolt of lightning striking him dead. He was on his feet before he even knew he was standing. With his heart pounding in his ears, he thought it was a miracle that he could make out footsteps, like someone was running up the stairs, continuing to yell his name.

It was a blessing that Makoto was quick to react. She tossed him his shirt while throwing her own over her head. He was just way too shook up to put his on before Futaba reached the top of the stairs.

“Ren! I was…oh!” There was a look of fear or excitement on her face until she took in the room. Ren could only pray she didn’t start asking questions. “Uh, Sojiro said you were watching a movie?”

He was going to burn alive. He couldn’t tell Futaba it just happened to be over. They hadn’t been upstairs for more than an hour. What else could he tell her so she wouldn’t think they were *doing* anything?

“W-We were trying to decide on one, b-but Ren has to do things the hard way.” For once in his life, he willingly remained silent and let Makoto craft the white lie. “He stupidly thought he could do more pull-ups than me, and he’s been sulking instead of deciding on a movie.”

Ren could feel Makoto’s eyes on him, but his mind was remembering how she felt under his fingertips…

Yep. She could do more pull-ups than him easily. Maybe he would work on besting her so *she* could enjoy the way *he* felt…

“Oh. Okay.” Futaba then shook her head and barreled towards him, clearly not offended by him being shirtless. “Ren! I have some bad news! Like, bad-bad! Like, I don’t want to tell you bad but I have to tell you!”

He would have laughed at her, but there were tears forming in her eyes. She was terrified. He dropped a hand to her shoulder, hoping to calm her down. “It’s okay. What’s wrong?”

She sniffled. He swallowed. Makoto came to stand next to him. “A-Akechi…”

His heart began to beat faster. Instinctively, he reached out to find Makoto’s hand. “Akechi what?”

When Futaba’s eyes met his, Ren felt the world slip away from him.

“He said he’s going to kill you.”

Chapter 153

Chapter 153

They were to head into Sae's palace that night, and it made it hard to think about anything else.

Anytime Minako was overcome with anxiety or anger, she always found herself in the kitchen, preparing dinners or cleaning or *something.* Today, she couldn't even do that. She sat on the couch in the living room, the TV on for background noise, hoping it would help her not fall into the abyss of her mind.

It didn't work. Ever since Makoto went to school and Akihiko went to work, she fell deeper into that corner of her heart that was growing heavier by the day. According to Makoto, her team had reached the "treasure room", but Akechi had asked them to wait to send the calling card. In the meantime, Mitsuru was going to start putting into motion her side of the bargain to trap this "bad guy", or Akechi, and she was going to be taking her along as well.

It had been a grand idea days ago when the suggestion was made. Now, Minako was terrified. She had no idea what she was getting into. The two times she had ventured off into the Metaverse, nothing serious had happened. The few shadows her team had fought had been nameless, ugly beasts. She may not have been an expert in the Metaverse, but she knew where she had traveled to before and where she was *going* to be heading were two different places.

A place where Akihiko saw a shadow version of Sae and couldn't do anything. If *he* was rendered useless at the mere sight of her, what would she do? Even if Minako thought she had accepted that Sae wouldn't come around until after the Phantom Thieves did their thing, if there was even a small chance to reach out to Sae, she would do it in a heartbeat.

What was her palace like anyway? Akihiko nor Makoto had commented about it. She didn't think Sae would have a gaudy princess palace, never being one for such things as a child. From

what she could understand, it had something to do with her subconscious, what she *truly* wanted or saw the world as. The more Minako tried to imagine her daughter's heart, the more it started to *hurt.*

Akihiko wanted to see the positives in the situation. It had brought them all closer together as a family. Sae was starting to realize the dangers of the world around her. Minako had been reunited with friends she assumed she would never see again. After years of Sae not being a part of the family, they were *so close* to bringing her back…

All she could think about was the fact she couldn't help Sae sooner, or on her own. What if there had been no Metaverse for them to change her heart? How would they have saved her then? Would it happen to Sae again? Was this really for the best?

Her eyes began to wander around the room, looking at nothing in particular. Until she caught the only family picture on one of the shelves in the hallway. It was one of the things Akihiko let her do to decorate the apartment when they moved. The photo itself should have been nothing special, but it had been the last picture they had taken *together.*

She had looked at it a million times in the past, wondering if the day would ever come that they could take another one. Now, it made her cry. There was hope, and that hope was literally right around the corner. All she had to do was keep believing in Sae, in Makoto, in Akihiko, and they could be together as a family once again.

The picture also helped her to think about the happier memories with Sae. How angry and jealous she was when she found out she was going to be a sister. How Sae always complained about how noisy Makoto was as a baby, but would always be standing over her crib with a toy or telling her a story to soothe her. How Makoto was always so happy to see her big sis after school because Mom wouldn't let her watch TV all day…

Makoto had always been her problem child, but Sae did all she could to keep her entertained and out of trouble. Sae took care of Makoto when Minako was fighting with Akihiko, or anytime she was

home with her sister. She may never have told Sae enough, but she was a wonderful sister. She was likely the best thing that ever happened to Makoto.

Maybe that was why Makoto was so determined, yet *terrified* to defeat her sister.

Minako nearly had a heart attack when she heard a door shut off in the distance. She had lost track of time once she sat down, but it was too early for anyone to be home. In a panic, she threw herself to her feet and was about to run into the kitchen for a weapon when she saw Akihiko come into the room.

A hand flew over her heart. “You scared me.”

He looked apologetic, then she realized he was holding something behind his back. Once her heart rate had returned to a normal pace, she gave him a curious look.

A light blush appeared on his face that warmed her immensely. The next second, he held out a small box. “I, uh, figured you could use some cheering up today.”

Her eyes started to burn, but she refused to cry over his kindness. Yet. “You know, you could have just come home early, and I would have been happy.”

He chuckled at her as he took a step closer. “Just open it.”

If Akihiko ever surprised her with anything, it was sweets, chocolate, or flowers. Very rarely did he buy her jewelry unless it was for Christmas. It may have been an early gift, since Christmas was coming up anyway, so she humored him and took the box into her hands.

“Thank you, honey.” She felt his eyes on her as she popped the box open to find a small charm on a necklace. It looked very similar to the one he had given Makoto a while back, so maybe he wanted all of them to have one.

She removed it from the box, then realized it was a locket and not a charm. While her mind began to swim in what he could have

possibly meant by giving her this, she felt his hand gently push against the small of her back.

“When Sae comes back to us, we’ll have to get another family picture.” His voice was a whisper as he leaned his head against hers, encasing her with just *him.* There was nothing else in that moment. “So long as we can get Makoto to sit still, you can put it in there, to always have it, to always remember what happens when you never give up.”

She was so emotional that she was speechless. She never moved, never cried, and had it not been for her body’s reflexes, she wouldn’t have *breathed.* On a day where she was drowning, *again* , he not only realized it, but saved her. It was the perfect thing she needed. The sweetest thing he could have done. All while she never thought he would even *know.*

His other hand came to wrap around the one that held the locket. “We’ll save her, Minako. I promise.”

His words broke the dam holding back her emotions. The hand not in his reached up to grab a hold of his jacket and she wept. She couldn’t think of anything to say to him, nor could she do anything but *cry* . He had always been too good to her, then knew exactly how to cheer her up and make her doubts and concerns turn into nothing.

She loved him so much. She couldn’t even imagine how miserable she would be right now if she had left him like she had threatened so many times in the past.

Akihiko let her cry for what felt like hours, holding her against him and telling her over and over that everything would be okay. That he loved her. That he loved their children. That this nightmare would soon be behind them for good.

The only time she felt him stir had been when she heard his phone go off in his pocket. As hard as it was to separate herself from him, she didn’t want him to miss an important call because she was still so damn emotional. He kept an arm around her back while he reached for his phone, and she was more than willing to accept the

chance to stay close to him.

“It’s Mitsuru,” he told her before he flipped his phone open. She rested her head against his chest, feeling the beat of his heart lull her into drowsiness. She could have easily listened in on their conversation, but right now, she only wanted to be engulfed by him.

Minako got quite the start when Akihiko jerked back in surprise. His voice made her become more alert. “Why the hell would we change our plans now?”

He was angry, and she was suddenly upset that she didn’t know *why.* A change in plans? Was something wrong with Sae? Did this have to do with Sae?

She waited as patiently as she could for them to discuss whatever they needed to, but her heart sank into her stomach when Akihiko went from angry to horrified. She couldn’t wait to know what was going on after that. “Aki? Is something wrong with Sae?”

At least a minute passed without an answer, or without him even *moving.* It wasn’t until she tugged on his arm that he blinked and seemed to realize where he was. She repeated her question. “Is something wrong with Sae?”

She didn’t know whether to feel relieved or nervous when he shook his head. “N-No…”

If only his words matched his body language. “Aki, please…”

He shook his head harder, then addressed Mitsuru. “Then come over here and we can decide what to do from there.”

Akihiko closed his phone, but Minako felt like she was going to break her teeth if he didn’t tell her what was going on. Thankfully, he didn’t leave her wondering for long. “Fuuka I guess overheard Akechi talking to someone about killing Amamiya. Mitsuru is coming over to discuss a new strategy.”

She felt like she ran into a brick wall. Was he serious? Was *Akechi* serious? Why? What did any of this mean?

“It’s alright, Minako,” he said as he dropped a hand to her shoulder. “If anything, this proves that Akechi is the same person who tried to kill me. We’ll catch him now. Mitsuru seems like she’s got a plan.”

What would Makoto do if she found out? Should they tell her? And Ren? Or would that be too much pressure to handle and both of them would snap?

“I-Is Makoto…is she okay?”

Akihiko narrowed his eyes. “I don’t know. She’s hopefully on her way home right now. I don’t know how I feel about telling her. She doesn’t need anything else to worry about.”

Now, Minako started to pace around the apartment. When her eyes caught sight of her phone, she ran to it, then frantically started typing a message to her daughter.

Akihiko crossed the room and grabbed her hands before she could send it. “Don’t. Telling her would only push her over the edge.”

“I need to know that she’s okay!” She yanked her hands away from him, then turned on her heel so he wouldn’t stop her again. He sighed loudly behind her, but wisely said nothing. Her message wasn’t anything she thought would be a cause for alarm, however, she wasn’t in the best mindset to know *anything.*

So, as soon as she sent her message, Minako called her. Sensing Akihiko moving to try and stop her, she used her shoulder to keep him away. But the phone continued to ring and ring without her picking up. What if Akechi had already gone after Makoto, and was now moving on to someone else? What if he was using Makoto to bait Ren? What if…

“M-Mom?”

Had Akihiko not been standing behind her, she would have fallen to the floor. Makoto was okay. She was probably on her way home from school. Or out with her friends. But she was safe.

Unable to say anything, Akihiko took her phone from her hands and spoke to their daughter. “We’re letting you know that we’re going out

with Mitsuru, so don't be alarmed when you come home and we're not here."

While Minako was happy he had been able to play off her desperation as nothing important, she was still so *afraid* . Makoto was fine; she heard it in her voice. But did she know? When would Akechi try and hurt Ren? And how, if at all, would he use the others?

"Minako."

Her eyes lifted to Akihiko, who gave her a hard stare. "It's going to be okay. It could be nothing. And if it's true, we will have a plan. Nothing is going to happen to Amamiya or Makoto or anyone else."

It was just so much harder to believe than she wanted to admit.

She was left alone until Mitsuru and Fuuka showed up an hour later. After everyone was inside and comfortable, she felt her phone *ping* in her hand. It was a message from Makoto, and another wave of relief rushed over her.

Ren said he was going to cook me dinner, so I'll be with him. I'll text you when I'm heading home!

Both of them were okay, and they both were together, so they would *be* okay. Akechi was a tiny weak little thing, so if he even tried to harm either of them, Makoto would make him regret it for sure. Knowing that much, Minako found it easier to focus on the conversation around her.

"We've anticipated something like this from the very beginning," Mitsuru started. "We just now have little time for trial and error. We will need to take care of everything tonight so the children can send the calling card with confidence."

"Does he know?" Akihiko looked over at her. "This couldn't have been a new development in their plan. But how can we tell him without him freaking out?"

Fuuka clasped her hands together. "Futaba-chan is aware of the situation." Her eyes then moved over to Mitsuru. "We already decided that he should know."

Akihiko groaned loudly. “And what’s that going to do to him? Something on that level is going to *crush* him.”

“What you’re forgetting, Akihiko, is that he’s working with us.” Mitsuru leaned forwards into her hands. “Hiding this kind of information from him would only cause more harm.”

“How the hell do you figure that?”

“Because he’s about to become a major player in our plan.”

The room fell quiet. Mitsuru spared a look to Fuuka. Akihiko kept shifting around in his seat, likely upset, but waiting for them to speak. Minako continued to simply focus on her breathing, lest she have another breakdown and give them a reason to fret over *her.*

“Do you plan on sharing what you want to do?”

She watched Mitsuru fall back in her spot. “The first thing we need to do is verify that what we’ve come up with will work. There is no sense in explaining as much to the children if our theories about the Metaverse are wrong.”

Akihiko sighed like he was annoyed. “And if you’re wrong? What are you going to tell Amamiya then?”

Out of nowhere, Minako began laughing. All eyes fell to her with a mix of confusion and surprise. “I’m sorry.” She forced herself to steady her breaths, then explain why she laughed in the first place. “Aki, what did you say to me an hour ago?”

His features softened somewhat, but not enough to where she knew he was comfortable. While he let his own words replay in his head, she said them again for emphasis. “It’s going to be okay.”

Fuuka gave a subtle nod of her head. “She’s right, Akihiko. Even if we are wrong, which I don’t believe we are, we will adapt. With all of us thinking together, we can make anything happen!”

“We should head out as soon as we can.” Mitsuru pushed herself to her feet. “I’ve asked Ken and Aigis to meet us at the courthouse. Junpei will keep an eye on Sae. Yukari will keep an eye on

Amamiya. I have other operatives that will watch over the others. As soon as we've passed into Sae's palace, I will discuss our strategy."

Akihiko exhaled, but nodded his head and stood up as well. She offered him a weak smile to assure him that while they both may be in panic mode, they would be together, and they would do everything they could to help. He returned the gesture before he reached out to take her hand.

"Amamiya is going to owe me for this."

She smacked him on the chest and followed behind him and the others a moment later. They all traveled by car to the courthouse, and it had been a long time since Minako had been in a Kirijo car. Driving down the streets of Tokyo was a far different experience than taking the trains. In fact, she felt like a little child, forgetting all about the dark cloud hanging over her head, and admired feeling so *small* inside a city of skyscrapers.

When they passed the Diet Building, however, she was hit with another of her "random" headaches. Akihiko had sat next to her and leaned over to ask her if she was okay. At first, she thought it was due to stress, since they were getting closer to the courthouse. But when it faded a block later, she wondered if maybe she was just more tired than she thought.

"Minako?"

She figured it would be rude to keep her friends and Akihiko on edge. "Sorry. It passed. I'm alright now."

"You've been having these headaches more often." Akihiko turned his attention to Mitsuru. "Ever since she went to the Metaverse. Why?"

Mitsuru lowered her head with a solemn expression on her face. "I don't know. It could be a sign that she might be close to getting her powers back. It could be nothing at all."

She could *feel* Akihiko's glare. "It's not *nothing."*

Minako placed her hand on his arm. "It's okay. I think it's trying to tell

me something, but…I don't know what that is yet."

Her statement didn't do what it wanted. Mitsuru and Fuuka gave each other a look. Akihiko, however, shook his head adamantly. "I don't want you to come with us. I know you want to, but you keep getting *worse* every time you go there."

"Aki." She waited to continue until he was looking at her. "I *will* go, because she is my daughter, and this is *my* way of being able to help." Before he could turn away, her hand tightened around his arm. "I'm fine. I promise."

They left it at that, thankfully. No one seemed perfectly satisfied, but they had more pressing matters to attend to. Once Sae was safe, once Ren was safe, maybe they could figure out what was really going on.

When the car came to a stop, Minako was about to stretch out, but Mitsuru held up a hand to keep her seated. "We are close enough to the courthouse to enter from here. It will be safer this way."

A few minutes later, they were joined by Aigis and Ken. Minako moved around the car so she could give Aigis a hug, something that just came naturally at this point. If anyone found it odd or a little much, no one said anything.

"Yeah, I missed you, too, Minako."

For a good laugh, she reached over and pinched Ken's cheeks. "I'm so glad."

"Alright." She saw Fuuka pull out her phone and lift it up towards her face. "Sae Niijima. Courthouse. Casino."

By now, she should have been used to that weird feeling of the worlds twisting together, but as she struggled to find her bearings, she felt sick again. It was different than her headache, but still unpleasant. And like she expected, Akihiko was at her side before she even knew he was there.

"Are you okay?"

They were still inside the car. How was that possible? Didn't they warp somewhere? And what had Fuuka said into her phone? She remembered Ken had said something the last time she went to the Metaverse that they had to say a bunch of words to go to the palace, kind of like a computer? What did it mean?

Akihiko and Aigis were kind enough to help her out of the car, and for a while, she couldn't make sense of anything. Nothing looked like it had changed. It may have been a little brighter, but that was it. When they went to that other place at the station, the change was obvious and immediate.

She couldn't help but ask, "Where's the palace?"

Mitsuru nodded her head, a sign to follow after her, and she did. She gave her a signal to remain quiet and hidden behind the other cars and objects. A minute or so later, she came to a stop. "Right there."

To say she wasn't in awe was an understatement. While she thought Sae wouldn't have anything small and bland, it was much more impressive than she was willing to believe. Not that Minako had been to a casino, or any kind of club on this kind of scale, it was intriguing to say the least. Bright. Extravagant. Flashy. Almost like that princess palace in a fairy tale, but modern.

… *Why?*

Mitsuru came to stand next to her while she continued to gaze up at the building. "Sae sees the courthouse as a place where she controls the odds. A place where she's always the winner. No matter who enters, they cannot defeat her. This is why it's taken this form."

Her heart seized in her chest. She was relieved to some extent that Sae's palace took shape from work related issues, supposedly. It was still hard to fathom that her hatred went so deep to spawn something like this. There had to have been so many warning signs that Minako could have picked up on to *stop* Sae before she became so… *demented.*

"Ken. Aigis. You two will accompany Fuuka around the town. We need to see how much of this ties in with reality." Mitsuru then

turned her piercing eyes to her. “You and Akihiko will stay with me. Their searching will be for nothing if they are caught. We don’t sense any shadows outside the palace, but we need to make sure it stays that way.”

Were they going to have to go inside? Would they go inside? Did she *want* to go inside? “A-Are we going…inside?”

The way Mitsuru paused made her sick to her stomach. Minako didn’t know if she was going to have the heart to see her daughter now. “No. Our mission is to explore the outer regions of the palace. I worry that if we were to attract attention inside, we could cause more problems for the children.”

It was sound judgment, but she couldn’t tell if she was happy with it or upset by it. She didn’t want to face Sae and hear all the terrible things she would have to say. At the same time, she wanted to see her. She wanted to *try* to reason with her.

“It’s too late, Minako.” Akihiko took her hand and gave it a light squeeze. “Nothing we were to say to her shadow would make a difference. We’ve come too far now. It’s best for you not to see her.”

“I agree,” came Mitsuru’s reply. “The less trouble we cause, the better.”

She tried to focus on her breathing as the conversation turned to their mission. “What are we looking for?”

Everyone gave Mitsuru their undivided attention. Minako tried, but her mind was still working in overdrive thinking about how *this* could have happened to her daughter.

“We need to know what areas we can use to our advantage in the real world. I highly doubt Akechi will kill anyone unless it’s one on one, and he is greatly outnumbered in the Metaverse.”

Fuuka added, “We hope to lure him into a trap in the police station and use the Metaverse to our advantage. This way, the bad guys will think they’ve succeeded with their assassination when in reality, they haven’t.”

“…And you’ll need bait.” She could see the gears in Akihiko’s head turning. “This is what you want to use Amamiya for?”

Mitsuru nodded slowly. “Akechi not only wants to offer him to Sae to push her over onto their side, but if he’s the one initiating the mental shutdowns, he needs to eliminate the competition. We had plans to use you, Akihiko, until Makoto informed us that Akechi already *knew* who they were.”

Akihiko sighed, rubbing both of his hands over his face. “He’s a child.”

“Aww. Dad cares.”

This was a serious matter, but Minako couldn’t help but smile at Ken’s comment.

However, Akihiko continued. “You can’t force him to go through with this when you’re going to lock him in a room and tell him not to *die.* ”

“You underestimate me, Akihiko.” Minako knew the conviction in Mitsuru’s voice. From Akihiko’s expression, he did as well. She was confident. Ready. Meticulous. “As of right now, with all the data we’ve gathered, Akechi is working with the police to have Amamiya arrested following the conclusion of Sae’s palace. If we let that happen, and we can freely switch between the police station and the palace, we can create the scenario we want.”

“By putting Amamiya and Akechi in the same room and telling them to duke it out?” He clenched his hands at his side. “Did you *forget* what happened to me when they interrogated me? You don’t think they won’t do the same to him just because he’s a teenager? They’ll treat him like a terrorist!”

Minako carefully grabbed one of his hands, but she highly doubted he noticed she was there. It was precious that he was so concerned about Ren, someone he always claimed not to care about. The plan wasn’t making any sense to her anyway, but she trusted Mitsuru. And by the end of the argument, there would be no more holes in the plan. Between the two of them, they could think of every contingency and have a way to fix it if need be.

Just like they had done back when they were all in high school.

“I actually anticipate them doing much the same.”

“Why would you *want* him to go through that?!”

“Akechi will try to kill Amamiya regardless of where he is, Akihiko. Knowing where he is likely to strike and preparing for it will save Amamiya’s life.”

“And how is he going to hop over into the palace? They’re going to take his phone for evidence. Who’s going to hide in the room to flip the switch for him while not tipping the wrong people off?”

“Sae will.”

Hearing the name of their daughter, Akihiko’s voice got caught in his throat. Minako took a step forward. “You want Sae to be there to stop Akechi from killing Ren?”

Silence.

Then, “This plan only works if one, we can prove there’s a link between the police station in reality and in the palace. Two, Amamiya agrees to get captured and arrested. And three, they don’t steal Sae’s treasure.”

Minako didn’t consider herself the smartest person in the world, but she was starting to feel like her brain was going to implode. “W-Why?”

“They can’t lose access to the palace.” She was surprised to hear Akihiko’s voice instead of Mitsuru’s. He sounded so tired. “And this is Sae’s case to work on. She’s going to fight like hell to interrogate him.” He released his breath to the point she thought he was going to collapse. “Do you really think Sae has come around enough to trust him without a change of heart?”

Fuuka was the one who answered him. “If we can place Sae near Akechi, we can trigger the app at the right time. Akechi shouldn’t know anything has changed.” Fuuka grabbed both of her hands nervously in front of her. “It’s a wonderful plan in theory. If we can

give Sae our phone that already has the app, she can navigate between the Metaverse and the police station. Then, it will only fall to if Amamiya can convince Sae that this world really does exist."

Akihiko laughed weakly. "She's not going to do whatever he asks her to, or accept any kind of *gift* from us."

"Without the right motivation." Mitsuru took a step forward. "If Amamiya can tell her what has happened from start to finish, Sae will have no choice but to accept the fact that they are innocent. If she knows that much, Akechi is her next suspect. Once that becomes clear to her, Amamiya should be able to convince her of her step in the plan, and we can set Akechi up there." She paused for a second. "As for the phone itself, I have plans to speak with her tonight to share what information we've found on your hitman."

"You're putting a lot of faith in her."

Now Minako felt like she could speak. "I think it will be okay. From everything you've said about Sae, hearing Ren's story will be the final push she needs to come to *our* side. And besides," she said with a smile. "She loves Makoto. I'm sure Ren could use that to his advantage."

Ken laughed off to the side while Akihiko shook his head. "This is a huge risk for both of them."

She tugged on his hand until he finally looked over at her. "Then let's do all we can to make sure it all goes smoothly."

She didn't think it was enough to completely wipe away his concerns, but *he* had noticed a change in Sae. He spoke about her more often, in a more positive light, with more *hope.* Ren had already done wonders for Makoto, and Minako knew if he had a chance to speak with Sae, he would be able to save her as well.

"Now." Mitsuru took control over the group once again. "None of this will be possible if we find nothing to link us back to the real world. We will draw up another plan if that's the case. If we succeed, I will speak to Amamiya first thing tomorrow morning. We will work with Futaba and go over the details while everyone is at work and at

school and go from there.”

Aigis and Ken nodded their heads once. Fuuka clapped her hands together. Akihiko rubbed at the side of his head with a muffled, “Fine.”

And in that moment, she prayed to whatever god would hear her, that they keep her children safe, keep Ren and his friends safe, and keep their streak of luck going in their favor.

“Let’s get to work.”

Chapter 154

Chapter 154

Akihiko always loved Leblanc. The coffee. The environment. The *peace* .

He highly doubted the shop would offer the same comfort after they had their chat with Amamiya.

Mitsuru went with him, only because she wouldn't let him do it on his own. It was probably for the best; if Amamiya had any questions or anything he wanted to add or change, Mitsuru would be the better voice of reason. *He* was only going because he felt obligated to be the one to break the bad news, to check in on Amamiya's state of mind, and maybe help reassure him that they had no intentions of failing.

Still. To be a child with so much of his future ahead of him, then have a relative stranger tell him he was going to be fine with a plan that didn't even sit well with *him,* it was a little overwhelming.

He briefly wondered if perhaps Minako would have been better suited for this conversation. He just didn't want her to have to remember such a traumatic event and turn it into a positive motivator…

"You don't have to say anything, Akihiko."

He also owed it to Makoto. They had gone to pick her up from Yongen-Jaya Station after the palace so they could check on her well-being. He had known she was with Amamiya (he would have cringed had it been any other situation) when the news was likely broken to him, and he worried that she would have been in a panic. Makoto hadn't said much on the way back home, but she was jittery, unable to sit still, and clinging to his arm like she was a terrified child.

She had exploded when they returned to their apartment,

unleashing a fury of questions, doubts, threats, that left both him and her mother stunned. Minako had been the one to help ease her troubles well enough to help Makoto get some sleep, or at least, not go out and hunt down Akechi in the middle of the night.

“I’ll kill him. I will. If he does anything to Ren, I’ll make him pay!”

Akihiko couldn’t *blame* Makoto for her anger, but that didn’t mean he had dreams where Makoto was *not* covered in blood and promptly thrown into jail for murder...

So while it would have been easier to let Mitsuru take the brunt of the situation, it wouldn’t sit right with him. He just chose to keep his comments and doubts to himself as they took the trip to Leblanc. According to Mitsuru, all of the Phantom Thieves would be meeting after school, and she thought it would be best to go over her plan and see if they had any insight or better ideas.

They at least had one thing going for them. Sae was in possession of Mitsuru’s phone, Metaverse app just as ready as it would be had she still had it. Fuuka could track it easily enough to make sure Sae actually took it to the interrogation. They were successfully able to move between worlds even outside of the palace…

But to ask so much of Amamiya…it made him sick to his stomach.

“I’m not going to push him,” Mitsuru added with a heavy breath. “We will explain what we have come up with and accept their decision.”

It didn’t make it any easier to think about. Not only was Sae’s life on the line, now Amamiya’s would be as well. Makoto would be impossible to calm down. She would never forgive him if anything happened to the boy because of *him.*

He couldn’t bear to lose another child over a poorly made decision. And last night, that was exactly the fear that kept him wide awake.

They arrived shortly after Mitsuru told him the teens would be there. She figured it might be best to let them have some time to themselves before storming in on the off chance they were more comfortable with each other. Futaba knew they were stopping by.

He told a frantic Makoto that morning before she left for school. Now, he just had to cross his fingers and hope that by some lucky miracle, everything didn't blow up in his face.

Akihiko offered a hello to Sojiro when he nodded his head after their arrival. Whether or not he knew why they were there, he didn't know, but he didn't ask questions when they headed to the back of the café. Before he took the first step up the stairs, he paused, took a deep breath, then slowly made his way up. He figured Mitsuru would have hurried him along, but she seemed just as worried as he had felt.

If only they had more time.

"Sanada!" Ryuji's loud voice almost had him falling back down the stairs. "Thank god man. Help us!"

His hands tightened at his sides. He couldn't even make eye contact with them. Mitsuru, like usual, took the lead. "That's why we are here."

The room was silent. Akihiko never had a chance to meet with all of them, aside from that night Minako asked them to change Sae's heart, but he knew a group of kids with nothing to say was a *bad* thing. They were probably terrified, like the time back when he was in high school when Ryoji delivered his ultimatum. It had taken them all some time to solidify their resolve, but these kids had no time. Just a few adults who concocted a plan that put far too much trust in someone who was back and forth…

"We have done some research and investigation, and we would like to discuss this strategy with all of you."

Akihiko took another deep breath, then lifted his head to the group of scared teens. Although attentive, they looked like they were all on their last leg. After all, Akechi already made one man die in cold blood. How would they stop him this time?

"If you have anything at all, we'd love to hear it." The cat said (that would never be easy to comprehend) as he hopped up on the table. "Futaba said you guys had been working on something to help."

He could have sworn Mitsuru's eyes were on him. All the sudden, he felt like he *had* to say something. Talking to terrified teenagers was what he was *good* at. This situation may be slightly more difficult, but it didn't change the fact that someone was relying on him to *help.* To be that ray of hope they had just lost.

"We went to the palace last night to test a theory," he finally forced himself to say. Once he broke that barrier, everything seemed to come pouring right out. "We were able to enter the Metaverse from the police station by using the app. However, the reason we tested this out in the first place isn't to *catch* Akechi, but to make him feel like he's succeeded…"

He saw Makoto shake her head. "T-This doesn't make sense. Why can't we just corner him into a confession?!"

He thought it would be best not to beat around the bush anymore. "Amamiya." There was a heavy weight on his chest. Mitsuru made a move to finish his thought, but he held up a hand to stop her. "We need you to get captured by them. The police will interrogate you. Sae will demand to interrogate you. And we believe that will be where Akechi will try and kill you."

To his surprise, Makoto jumped from her seat and stomped her foot with a glare that would have intimidated him any other time. "You want Ren to be the *bait?!"*

"The hell, man!"

Akihiko shook his head to steady himself. "Akechi knows better than to attack any of you in the Metaverse. His greatest place of power is outside that realm. He's not going to let you spend the rest of your life in jail, because you're still going to be a threat. So this is the only way to truly seal his fate."

"What good is that going to be when he's *dead,* Dad?!"

Makoto was more irate than he thought she would be. Thankfully, Mitsuru was kind enough to come to his aid. "Our plan is this: we allow them to believe they have caught the leader of the Phantom Thieves. Once arrested, Amamiya, you will tell Sae your version of

events to gain her trust. I have personally given her a phone with the app downloaded, so all you need to do is ask her to show her phone to Akechi after you've come clean to her. Sakura and Fuuka will handle the rest."

Futaba weakly smiled and nodded. Akihiko took the chance to add on to her statement. "This also means you cannot steal her treasure."

"How?" Makoto's building rage made it extremely hard to breathe. "How can you *ask* this of him?!"

Mitsuru took a step forward. "Amamiya. What I have asked of you is not fair, I know this. I can sit here and reassure you that we have thought of every possible scenario and have bridged all gaps, but I still cannot guarantee anything. However, this is our only chance to not only bring in Akechi, but all of those he works for." Then, she bowed deeply to him. "This is your choice to make. I will not think any less of you if you choose to walk away."

It was the moment of truth. If Amamiya did say no, like he should, they were fucked. They could succeed in stealing Sae's treasure and bringing about her change of heart, but then Akechi would be difficult to track and impossible to predict. Akechi was also one of the *many* , likely replaceable, so they had to find out all those involved before things spiraled even more out of control.

"You have no right to-,"

"I'll do it."

Everyone in the room gasped quietly. Makoto was fuming. The others were surprised and horrified.

But Amamiya took a step forward, both of his hands in his pockets, his eyes falling on him. "You may get tired of me saying this, but I'll never forget that day I stood in the back of that club, watching as you fought for our lives. Life for all of us could have been very different had you let your fear control your actions. I swore then that I would never let my fear keep me from doing all I can to help."

It was the first time since he had met the boy that Akihiko saw a *hero.* Not the annoying and charismatic jerk who swayed his daughter's heart, or the popular fanboy Minako liked to paint him as. He was a human who was willing to put his own life on the line for what was likely the only way to win. To save so many people. To put an end to the fear that had shaken all their lives.

If everything went well, he would owe Amamiya his life…

"Thank you," was all he was able to say to him. It was enough, as Amamiya nodded once, then turned his attention to Mitsuru.

"I, uh, hope it's not rude of me to ask to go over the plan in more detail, would it?"

She shook her head with a mild chuckle. "Not at all."

It was just a shame that Makoto took that moment to give him her most terrifying glare, then run past him down the stairs. Everyone's eyes followed after her, but it was Mitsuru's gaze that made him find his voice.

"I-I'll talk to her." He released his breath. "Give her a second to kick and punch something and she'll be back up."

He didn't know which part of that day was harder: asking Amamiya to play sacrificial pawn or telling Makoto everything would be okay.

Akihiko found her sitting at one of the barstools. Why she hadn't taken off outside and around the block, he could guess. She was angry *with him* , so if he came downstairs to talk to her, she could ditch him and make it clear to him how she felt about their plan.

When Sojiro passed her a glass of presumably water, he figured it was now or never. "Makoto, I don't like this anymore than you do, but-,"

"Stop it." She turned to him, gripping her glass much too tightly in her hands. "You've asked him to sign his death wish. We could have found another way. Just because *you* don't want him to be a part of my life doesn't mean you can *do* this to him!"

There was a look in her eyes that reminded him of that night, years ago, when Sae glared at him from across the table and told him she hated him. If he didn't fix this right now, that image would haunt him until Makoto turned on him just like her sister had.

"Trust me, Makoto." He wished his voice sounded half as strong as he needed it to be. "I wouldn't be asking this of him if I knew there was even the slightest bit of doubt. He's going to be fine."

"Then you're an idiot."

She tried to storm past him and back up the stairs, but he barely managed to catch her arm. "I won't let anything happen to him. I promise."

"And if he does die…" The red of her eyes made him feel like he was fighting with her mother. "I'm *never* going to forgive you for it."

Her sharp tone and the tears in her eyes came as a slap to the face. It really was a lot to ask Amamiya to do, with hardly no preparation, with people he had barely known a month. It was a sign of great character, trust, and respect to make this decision. Akihiko actually envied him for it.

But now, he wanted to come up with something better. Because he couldn't promise Makoto that he would be safe. There was a very real possibility that Akechi *would* kill him. There was a very real possibility that they would never save Sae, or bring all of those responsible for years of chaos and death to justice. Surely if they all sat back down and brainstormed, they could create a new plan that was so much *safer* …

It was too late now. They would learn so much about their enemies if they succeeded. They would lose *everything* if they failed.

Instead of waiting for Mitsuru, Akihiko thought it best to head on home. Minako could cheer him up, hopefully. He could definitely use a pick-me-up after Makoto basically told him that if Amamiya died, she would hate him forever. Besides, he wouldn't be in the right mindset to help develop details for a plan with his daughter cutting him down at every turn.

The gods hated him that day. When he returned home, Minako was gone, leaving behind a note that she was out gathering supplies with Yukari for their terrifyingly big adventure. He felt himself lose his balance and considered it luck that he was able to fall onto a couch. For over a month, he had been able to convince himself, and others, that if they all did everything they could, they would get Sae back, they would bring down Akechi, they would all be *safe.*

It would be his greatest challenge to date. His part of the plan was only to be the eyes and ears around the police station. Since there were a number of cops he couldn't trust, Akihiko doubted any of them would come up to him and ask him to join in the capture or give him specific details without prying them.

All he could do was offer a bunch of words. Words he honestly didn't have the heart to fully believe himself.

His phone buzzed in his pocket. Feeling anxious, he quickly rolled up into a seated position and pulled out his phone. He sighed in disappointment when it was from Mitsuru.

Makoto and I are going to deliver the calling card. Sae is out of town and this needs to be done tonight. We've fine-tuned our plan, and everyone is willing to see it through. Makoto is just scared. She meant nothing of what she said to you.

Akihiko cradled his head in his hands. He was tired. He was angry with himself. He was pretty sure he was losing his mind. Makoto's words echoed in his mind, along with Sae's from years ago, and now he had to brace himself for how Sae would react to the calling card. He really hoped she just laughed it off and threw it away. Or would she feel threatened and come to him? Would that be a tip in the *wrong* direction for her? Their plan was based heavily on Sae teetering in the middle, and Amamiya's story should pull her over…

He was lost in his own mind for what felt like *hours.* Every negative thought and fear started to dominate his heart. The truth would be known tomorrow, or the next day, or soon, but he would be on edge the entire time. But he couldn't let Minako or Makoto worry about him. Not that they wouldn't be just as terrified and anxious as he would be, but it was his job as a father to be that support for his

family in their greatest time of need.

He laughed bitterly at that.

“I’m home!”

Minako scared the hell out of him, but when she came into the living room, her bright smile disappeared as she caught the look on his face. “What’s wrong?”

He didn’t have to say anything to her before she ran up to him and put her hands on his shoulders, supporting him as he nearly collapsed to the ground. “Did he say no? Is he okay? Is Makoto okay? Sae?”

It would be rude to keep withdrawing into himself and let her suffer when she did nothing wrong. “Makoto hates me.”

He was caught off guard when Minako chuckled at him. “She’s bound to be scared, honey. But I’m sure she doesn’t hate you.”

In a spark of anger, he pushed her off of him. “I will lose *everything* if that boy dies! I will have to deal with Makoto walking out of my life just like Sae did all those years ago. Sae will never come back to us! I’ll have to live the rest of my life knowing I asked a *child* to put his life on the line because we couldn’t think of something *better!”*

Minako only stared back at him, as if waiting to see if he was done venting. It felt good to get it all out in the open, but it didn’t ease the painful fact that his life could be very different soon. After all he had done and fought through, it would all be for nothing. Death by Shido’s hands would have been a blessing…

“Are you done?”

Akihiko narrowed his eyes, then dropped them to the ground. “I guess…”

Her hand came out of nowhere and slapped him across the face. In shock, his hand covered where she had struck him as he grew numb under her glare. “I know that this has to be hard on you, and Makoto, but damn it, Aki, believe in yourself. Believe in him. We’ve

come so far this year. You've suffered *so* much. But you always keep *fighting.* Not every fight is physical, and I know you're mentally strong enough to stand by what you know is right. That, honey, is powerful enough to protect those you love. So don't let it fall to pieces now."

He continued to stare at her, unable to find any words to say. Minako chose to sit at his side on the couch, then her arms wrapped around him and he tumbled into her. "It's not going to be easy, waiting, hoping, believing we've made the right choice. But I'll be right here with you every step of the way."

All of his anxiety rushed out of his lungs in one giant breath. He could have fallen asleep against her at that moment, even given his frantic state of mind. She must have sensed it as well, as her fingers began combing through his hair. All he could do was sit in her arms, weak, afraid, but clinging onto her like she was the only thing keeping him alive.

At least Minako wouldn't hate him after this was all over…

"I'm sorry I hit you."

He felt her rest her head on top of his. He was exhausted, but hearing her speak so softly helped give him energy. "Don't be. Sometimes I deserve it."

She laughed softly into his hair. "Yes, you do. But not because I'm mad. Because sometimes, it's the only way I can make you see how wrong you really are. And I'm sure you were listening very intently."

Akihiko pulled away from her enough to look into her eyes. "I always listen to you."

She threw her head back and laughed. "You're such a *liar!"*

And he kissed her, because no words could describe how much he loved her and how much he needed her and she always had a pretty laugh. He should have known that she would respond with much more passion than he had intended sitting on the couch with Makoto likely to be home at any given time. But he wasn't about to deny her

anything. Not now. Not when the future was looking more and more bleak as the hours ticked by.

Minako was surprisingly the one who broke away from him first. When her arms wrapped around his neck, he could feel his face heat up like he was twenty years younger. “I really, *really…* ” Her smile and her hesitation made him burn even more. “I’m really uncomfortable in this position.”

She laughed at his reaction, then planted a soft kiss to his lips and used him to help her sit up against the couch. “I’m getting old, you know. My back can’t bend like it used to.”

“You’re never too old to stretch, Minako,” he told her as he wrapped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her back into him.

He could practically feel her eyes rolling. “Maybe I just like to do things that annoy you.”

She was distracting him; he knew that now. He wasn’t about to tell her to *stop* , or upset her by not carrying on with the conversation. It was kind of nice. Maybe a little selfish, since he was sure Amamiya and his friends were having far different conversations amongst themselves…

However, he was far less paranoid and upset when she was sitting right next to him. Even in the silence, he found peace. Just knowing she was with him, matching her breathing to his own, it was comforting. It also gave his deteriorating confidence a boost to where he could once again believe that everything was going to be okay.

He was so much at peace that he almost jumped off the couch when he heard footsteps in the living room. Minako was still tucked under his arm, but she only laughed into his shoulder. Makoto had recently come home, and by the way she was walking off towards her room, she didn’t want to get caught.

Akihiko suddenly cursed his reflexes. He was in such high spirits again. He didn’t have the courage to face his daughter *now.* Makoto, however, thought differently and came around the couch to take a

seat. He watched as she folded her hands on her lap, held them tightly, then sighed and started playing with her fingers.

She was nervous. Likely apologetic. It gave him hope. “You don’t have to be sorry, Makoto.”

When she sighed and stopped fidgeting, his heart started to tighten in his chest. “I-I am sorry, Dad. I-I’m so scared. I know everyone thinks that everything is going to be okay, and I should too, but all I can think about is what could go wrong and what all I am going to lose…a-and…”

Minako sat up enough that he was able to cross the room and sit next to his daughter. As soon as he was beside her, she threw herself into him and cried. Minako gave him a weak smile, even with the sadness in her eyes. All he could do was hold Makoto like she was a child and had woken from a terrible nightmare.

In a sense, they were still living in one. “I know you’re scared. I know there’s so much left up to chance. I know that no matter what I say to you, it’s not going to make you worry any less.” His eyes once again found Minako, then he smiled at her. “But we’ll be right here with you every step of the way.”

Makoto nodded into his chest, but she remained attached to him. He didn’t mind. Anything he could do for her, he would. “Ren told me not to hate you. B-Because h-he said he knows…he knows this is all we can do…A-And he wants to…F-For Sis…”

His arms wrapped around her with more strength. “I promise you, Makoto, we will do everything we can to protect him. And your sister.”

“I-I know…” She sniffed once, then slowly released him to sit back. Her eyes never looked up at him. “I-I shouldn’t have been so…so harsh…”

He dropped a hand to her head, hoping to be that same source of comfort her mother had been to him. “What was rule number two, Makoto?”

Finally, she was able to lift her eyes and face him. “Back straight. Eyes up. Don’t smile.”

He noticed her hand reaching up to her neck, where he remembered she wore the pendant he had gotten for her. It made him wrap his arms around her again. “I love you so much, Makoto.” He lowered his head to hers to keep himself from losing his composure. “We’ll get through this. I promise.”

“I-I love you, too, Dad…”

That was all it took to bring back his resolve.

Chapter 155

Chapter 155

So many thoughts ran through her head, she didn't know where to begin.

Sae was at her wits end. She thought her mental breakdown a few days ago would have solved all of her problems, but here she was, staring out into the nothingness of her own apartment, unable to *think* . Her laptop was shut on the table in front of her. Her notes were hidden in the bag by the couch. For all intents and purposes, she was there, just a hollowed out human with so much to think about that there was nothing…

She groaned and leaned her head into her hand. Her days were getting longer and more frustrating. Her patience was tested every minute of every day. All the while, she had nothing about Shido, about Akechi, the Phantom Thieves. *Nothing.*

Well, she would at least get some answers soon. Her warrant was burning a hole in her bag. By Monday morning, she would have Sakura's place ripped to shreds. She would have every student at Shujin with motive to bring a change to Kamoshida *and* Kaneshiro into custody. But even greater than that, she would come face to face with Akihiko, remind him of his *failed* promise, and get all her answers out of him like she had been wanting for *months.*

There was a sudden twist in her stomach that *hurt* . A Shujin student with motive to change Kamoshida *and* Kaneshiro? It led her back to Makoto, who had been assaulted by one and then blackmailed by the other. If she wasn't a Phantom Thief herself, then she would *know* them .

She's your sister.

They saved Makoto, whoever they were. *Twice.* Akihiko couldn't bring Kamoshida into custody no matter how hard he tried. Kaneshiro had evaded police for *years.* On top of that, Madarame

had claimed the talent of children so they could have a place to live and be loved. Medjed had threatened to destroy the power grid of Tokyo. Okumura had been abusing his powers for however long.

Who was really in the wrong here?

They killed Okumura.

"How do you know that?"

…Why did she *care?* If Akechi could capture the leader of this vigilante group, then she could win this case. That was all she cared about. Winning. Shoving it into Akihiko's face that she could make a name for herself without him.

They saved your sister. Where would she be at had it not been for them?

She needed to get out. She needed to do something. She needed a vacation.

Just as she was about to head into her room to change, there was a knock on her door. Sae cursed under her breath, but then she began to wonder who it could have been. Her family had never been to her place because she never told them exactly where she lived. No one at work had ever stopped by before. In fact, the only people who usually came by were those that thought threats and violence would get her to drop a case.

She laughed to herself. Maybe this is what she needed. Someone to unleash her frustrations on while claiming self-defense.

She got quite the surprise when she opened the door. Her eagerness to pummel something quickly turned to a lump of dread that fell into her stomach. "W-What are you doing here?"

It shouldn't have been a surprise that Mitsuru would know how to find her, but unless she was bailing out Akihiko, the two never spoke. Sae was extremely uncomfortable, not knowing why she would be there, or why she thought it best to approach her at home…

Mitsuru smiled weakly and held up a hand. A peace gesture. Maybe. “I have some information for you.”

It hit her then that she had told Akihiko to look into Kaneshiro’s hitman and Mitsuru had to be the one to relay any information. Before she allowed her to come inside, Sae asked, “Is this about Akihiko?”

The elder shrugged her shoulders. “Just the name he gave me.”

There was an odd sense of relief after minutes of tension. Sae felt like she could finally release the breath she had been holding since the knock came to her door. “Then come in.”

Mitsuru shook her head. “I’m afraid I’m very busy at the moment. I only came out this way since I was passing by.” She watched her reach into the bag around her arm and produce a file. “Some light reading.”

Sae was hesitant about taking it, but then Mitsuru handed her something else. A phone. “What’s this?”

“This is for your own safety.” When Mitsuru’s eyes met hers, Sae felt a cold chill run up her spine. “You’ve gone behind your superior’s back to ask your enemy to find out more information on a dangerous man. They will know if you speak with me from your phone, so Fuuka has designed this to keep them from tracing your calls if you ever need to reach out to me. Whatever you need done, Sae, will remain between the two of us. I can promise you this.”

She couldn’t find any words to say. A part of her was nervous, since she knew what kind of hole she dug herself by asking *the enemy* for help. However, she was also, *touched,* in some regards. She had always thought of Mitsuru as an interesting person, a cool aunt when she was younger. Her relationship with Akihiko created a wall of ice between the two of them over the years. Yet here she was, breaking through that wall, and becoming an ally she needed when everyone else stood against her.

“Please stay safe, Sae,” was all Mitsuru said before she walked away. Sae wanted to say something to her, but even a pathetic

thank you couldn't pass her lips. She stood in the doorway, staring out into the evening night, unable to move or do much of anything.

If this was a setup, it was well played. Had it been Akihiko, she would have thrown everything back in his face. But Mitsuru wasn't devious or cunning or really anything *bad* until it came to Akihiko. And Sae did ask him to have *her* bring anything he found to her.

The chilly breeze is what finally snapped her out of her haze. With a tight grip on her file and the phone, she returned to her spot on the couch. Her head hurt. She was suddenly exhausted. Her interest in this hitman wasn't even enough of a motivator for her to look at the documents Mitsuru had given her.

Seriously. She needed a vacation. Surely no one would notice if she was gone for a week, right?

But then her phone went off on her lap.

Sae literally jumped and the phone fell to the floor. It was *her* phone, which likely meant it was related to *work.* Who the hell needed her so badly that they couldn't wait until morning? She just wanted a nice, hot shower, and maybe a drink and a month off.

The number on her phone was unknown, but she made a habit of picking it up regardless. She shook her head to clear any trace of weariness and slid a finger over her phone to answer the call. "This is Niijima."

"Sae Niijima. Public prosecutor. Akihiko's daughter."

The phone fell from her hands. "W-Who…" A second or two after recovering from her shock, she grabbed the phone and tried to calm herself down. It was a woman's voice. She was quiet, almost like she was trying to hide from something. "Who is this?"

"Speak to Kaori Ichika. Her best friend was Akechi's mother. She has the answers you're looking for."

Sae had no idea who the woman on the line was, who the woman she named was, but she had been doing her job long enough to know the feeling she was having. It may have been nothing. It may

be a prank. Or it could have been everything.

“How do I trust you without knowing who *you* are?”

There was silence for the longest time, but she waited. In fact, the longer the silence dragged on, the more Sae began to worry that this was *not* a prank, and someone was taking a great risk speaking to her.

Finally, she heard, “Tell Ohya her missing coworker is safe for now. Your father knows them both. They’ll know who I am.”

The click of the phone line came a little too quickly. She had a million other things to focus on, but for some reason, Sae whipped out her computer and got to searching. First, she looked into this Ohya person. Luck was on her side, since it wasn’t a common name, and unless Akihiko was out making new lady friends (she doubted), he would only know one. A reporter. And had it not been for the late night, she may have given said reporter a call to see if the tip had been even worth her time looking into.

Ohya’s “missing coworker” sparked a wave of anxiety. Kayo Murakami. Akihiko had worked with her to expose quite a few criminals in Kabukicho. The only reason she knew that without looking the woman up was because Sae had actually *met* her in the courtroom. She had actually questioned her on the stand several times. So how the hell did she not know this woman was *missing?* Why didn’t anyone file a report? Was there one, or had Murakami’s job put her in danger and she had no choice but to go missing?

Or had she been unlucky, like Akihiko had been, and been threatened to stay silent? Because unless she was losing her mind, the woman on the other line could have been Murakami…

With that, her gut feeling was able to push her to start looking into this Kaori person.

After all, who better to talk about the miseries of life than with a best friend? She just had to hope that Akechi’s mother really did the same.

However, thirty minutes into looking for the best friend, she hit a snag. Of course there would be more than one Kaori Ichika in the country. Assuming she was still *living* in Japan, or still living at all. There were a handful living in Tokyo alone, and Sae refused to hunt down them all just to eliminate them as potential witnesses.

So why did her tipster not add where she could find her specifically if this was so important?

But this could be her big bargaining chip with Akihiko. If this best friend could give her information on Akechi and his upbringing, she could use that against Akechi. If this tipster proved to be correct and this friend knew about the Phantom Thieves, or Akechi's role as the hitman in the other world, then she could dangle that proof over Akihiko's head until he finally confessed his side of the story. Regardless, she *had* to find something, and find that something fast.

She first started by crossing out those who were too young to have been friends with an adult who had been dead for years. Second, she looked up where Akechi's mother had spent a good deal of her life, then cross-checked locations with the remaining candidates. Six names made the cut, so now it was the grueling task of tracking them all down to narrow the list even further.

No one seemed to notice her investigation as the days went on, either at work or around town, and for once, she was grateful. In that time period, Sae managed to isolate one Kaori Ichiko, and she planned to take a train out of town to Odawara that very night to meet with her. To hopefully give herself an excuse, she passed onto the secretary that she was leaving early to travel to meet one of Kaneshiro's men hiding out in an area the same distance away from where she was headed to. It wasn't like anyone would care, or verify her excuse. Her computer was still locked down, and if she couldn't look up anyone, good old-fashioned legwork was the next best thing to do.

What a great time to have pissed off her boss.

Sae had been in such a rush that she didn't anticipate rain and freezing temperatures after leaving Tokyo. The train lines in Odawara were much different than those back home, and she didn't

really allot time to get *lost* . She was not only cold, and now wet, but hungry and growing annoyed the longer she walked around the city. The map seemed so easy to understand back at the office…

She was only supposed to be gone for a total of four hours, an hour and a half of that had been set aside for traveling. At the three-hour mark, still walking around like an idiot, she was to the point of giving up and going home. She had been a fool getting so worked up over something that may or may not have been crucial information for her mental shutdown case. And so help her if she did all of this for nothing...

Ten minutes later, on her walk *back* to the station, she found the small alley she had missed the first time. Sae considered it a stroke of good luck, and a sign that she was on the right path, when she found the apartment complex a block later. Granted she was tired and cranky, cold and hungry, but those feelings were forgotten about as she stepped into the elevator to head to her floor.

Soon.

She would have all the answers soon.

And Akihiko would have *nothing.*

There was a wave of hesitation that washed over her as she lifted her hand to knock on the door. What if this was all a hoax? What if they weren't home? What if she had the wrong person? What if she misunderstood the woman on the phone and she would never know the truth? Why did she do this in the first place? This was so very unlike her…

Her instincts forced her muscles to knock on the door instead of walk away. That was all the answer she really needed.

At least someone came to the door. It was a younger woman than she was expecting to see, which made her heart drop to her stomach. The woman eyed her curiously, and in her disappointment, the woman spoke first. "C-Can I help you?"

The woman looked to be a few years older than Makoto. There was

no way this was Ichiko. But she still had to be sure. “I’m looking for a Kaori Ichiko.” When she was given a blank stare, Sae reached into her bag to pull out her identification. “I’m from the Tokyo District Court. I was hoping she could answer a few questions.”

The girl’s eyes went wide, so Sae thought it was a good thing. She knew her, no doubt about it. Now she just had to hope the girl told her how to find the woman in question. “I-Is this about…t-that boy?”

Boy? Akechi? Did they already know why she was there? “A boy?”

One thing she learned early on in law school was to never put words in a witness’ mouth. You had to carefully snare them, pull an answer from them without leading them on. And Sae would hit that damn brick wall again if *boy* wasn’t *Akechi.*

“T-The one who…who saved me.”

Saving people didn’t sound like an Akechi thing to do, so Sae bit her tongue to brace for the impact ahead of her. “Are you Ichiko-san?”

The girl shook her head, but remained silent. Sae’s patience was beginning to thin again. “Is this her residence?”

Finally, a direct answer with a simple nod of the head. “Do you mind if I speak with her?”

The timid girl turned and walked back inside, leaving Sae at the door. Her heart was pounding in her chest, eager and nervous about what was going to happen. The girl she had been speaking with was far too reserved and quiet, and Sae really didn’t want to be pulling teeth all night to get her answers. She didn’t have a warrant, so she also had to tread carefully. Any hostilities felt would push her out the door and her trip would have been meaningless.

“Can I help you?”

This time, a much older woman came to the door, the younger woman hiding close behind her. There was a glare to the elder’s eyes, and Sae was quick to remind herself she was on a mission. There was no time for screw ups. She took a deep breath, then did all she could to come across as polite and soft-spoken as she could.

“I would like to speak to you, if you have a minute.”

“My daughter thinks you’re here about what happened to that boy last year.” The glare intensified. “While I’m sorry for what happened to him, I’m not about to have her tell the world what really happened that night.”

Sae held up her hands to calm her. “I’m not here about this boy in question. I’m actually here to see if you know a Goro Akechi.”

Again, Sae got the reaction she wanted; wide eyes, mild gasps of surprises. “G-Goro?”

She took note of the fact she called him by his first name. “You know him, yes?”

Both women looked at each other, but the silence caused Sae to panic. Worried they were about to end the conversation before it could get started, she carefully took a single step into the entrance. “If you know Akechi, then I would like to ask about his parents.”

And a different reaction spread across the faces in front of her. The younger girl did what Makoto would do when she was scared or trying to avoid people and bolted to the back of the room. The older woman heaved a sigh, a surprised expression still on her face, then she ushered Sae into the apartment.

“It’s best not to talk where eyes and ears can do their thing.”

Sae had spoken to many people in their homes in the past. She had interrogated people for years. But all of her experience and knowledge flew out the windows of her brain and she was suddenly a human sitting with other humans. It was the strangest feeling she had in years.

The younger girl handed her a cup of something, tea or coffee, to which Sae was grateful. The older woman dropped herself to the opposite chair and reached for a box of cigarettes on the table. “I don’t want to be rude, but you have some nerve to come to a stranger’s house and want to speak about a dangerous man.”

Sae grew anxious in her seat. Why would she need to worry? Did

they know Akechi was possibly a criminal? Or was one of his parents? A sibling? “You were friends with Akechi’s mother, correct?”

When the girl scampered back to sit next to the elder, the older woman sighed. “I can’t remember the last time anyone cared to ask about her.” Then, she glared at her. “Tell me why you’re here.”

All of her instincts were telling her to do what she did best. She had to keep control over the conversation or she would learn nothing concrete. She refused to go back home with *nothing* , especially since she *knew* she was on the right path *.*

However, in an uncharacteristic moment, she lowered her head and tried to earn the woman’s trust. “I-I know someone…and he’s been working tirelessly to apprehend several dangerous people. He’s been stabbed, shot, blackmailed, kidnapped, but he won’t give up. There’s not enough people fighting with him, since they’re all too afraid and feel it’s pointless.”

Sae could not believe what she was hearing from her own mouth, but the tension in the room seemed to evaporate. She blamed her lack of emotional control on the young girl in the room, who reminded her so much of Makoto. And if her words could calm them both down without saying Akihiko’s name, all would be fine.

So she continued. “I’m here for the truth. I’m here to show him, to show the world, what can happen when people stand together to bring justice to a broken system. No one should be able to get away with crimes just because of their status. And it’s my job to see them face the light.”

Silence.

It began to get uncomfortable.

Until, “You won’t be able to stop him.”

There was something cold growing in her stomach. Clearly both women were afraid of someone, Akechi or a family member. They also had to be quite powerful if Sae needed to be worried about

being out here.

Was that why the woman who gave her the tip had been so secretive? So no one would discover her identity? And if it really was Murakami, had she been investigating Akechi and his family and that had been why she “disappeared”?

The older woman took a drag of her cigarette. “I don’t know why Kumiko loved him. But she was someone who thrived on that one random good act of affection while being treated like shit.”

Hearing the name of Akechi’s mother gave Sae hope. She was going to find out the truth. “And sure enough,” Kaori continued, “He got her pregnant. She was elated. Thought it would finally seal the deal. Hell, even after Goro was born, she kept holding onto that hope he would return to her and love her.

“I don’t even think she cared about her son.” Hearing this, Sae cringed internally. “She took care of him, thankfully, but she basically tried to use him as a reason for his father to return to the picture.”

Sae asked, “And I take it he never did?”

“Oh, he did alright.” Sae reeled back in mild shock. “After several years of neglecting her, he shows back up for a night. He told her he loved her, and he would marry her, and never do her wrong again.”

The frown that came to Kaori’s face told her the rest of the story. “She was my friend. She was an idiot in love. But she was struggling. Emotionally. Financially. He kept promising her stability. And then, after he walked away too many times, reality finally came crashing down on her.”

Kaori smashed her cigarette butt into an ashtray. “Bastard didn’t pull the trigger, but he sure as hell killed her. Left his own kid in the dark. No family wanted him at the age he was. I tried to see if I could take him in, but by then, he had been taken into foster care, and no one would let a recent divorcee take a young child that wasn’t their own flesh and blood.”

Sae was literally stunned silent. She had come to learn about

Akechi's past and family to learn more about him and how he could be tied to the mental shutdown case, but all she was hearing was about a tragedy he had no control over. Granted her own situation was different, at least her parents loved her.

Kind of.

Did she just admit that to herself?

But, there was an elephant in the room she had to address. "And his father is…?"

Both women once again struggled, as if the thought of this man was vile enough to render them speechless. "I would like to think you know him, too."

There was something cold forming in her chest. She inhaled and swallowed hard. "I need you to say his name," she said, leaning forward to lock eyes with Kaori. "If you tell me his name, I can take action."

She couldn't, not yet, but she would. She was sure Akihiko would *love* to hear this from her. Assuming this man really was a criminal and not just a terrible father and lover.

And the bubble broke a minute later. "Masayoshi Shido."

Sae felt her entire body just *stop.* Everything stopped. She had come to get more information about Akechi in hopes it would lead to something. *This…* this was more than what she *ever* expected.

The feeling was overwhelming. It made her sick, cold, speechless. She was pretty sure she was *dead.*

"But you need to be careful," Kaori added as she reached for another cigarette. Sae jolted back to attention, suddenly wishing she had never come out at all. "I tried to go to the police a few times, but I was brushed off. This last year, he tried to kidnap my daughter on her way home from work. He not only threatened my daughter into silence, but he showed what he was capable of when he had that boy arrested just for helping her!"

Sae was tempted to tell her to stop talking, terrified of the revelation she *still* couldn't come to terms with, until something hit her.

Hard.

This wasn't the first time she was hearing about a falsified criminal charge in this part of the country. Against a teenager.

The daughter was the one to answer. "This is my fault. I-I was too afraid to help him. H-He's a scary man. He knew where I worked at, a-and he knew where I went to college."

When the young girl threw her hands to her face, it took strength not to shoot up from her seat and wrap an arm around her. She wasn't Makoto, but she reacted much the same.

"When she said you were from Tokyo, she was worried she was in trouble for lying on record."

And Kaori's words helped solidify that feeling in the pit of her stomach. "Do you know the boy's name? If I can talk to him, he could be a valuable witness."

Or he could be the same boy she saw walking around fighting for the chance to protect *her sister.*

The girl shook her head. "I-I don't know his name."

Sadly, Sae didn't think she needed to know to *know.* But if Amamiya knew Shido was the one who pressed false charges, why didn't he say anything to Akihiko?

… *Did* he?

"I'm sorry for bringing up such hardships, but it's been very helpful." Sae placed her half-empty cup on the table and pushed herself to her feet. "You have my word. I will do all I can to bring him to justice."

Kaori smiled pitifully, then as soon as Sae was standing outside the door, Kaori whispered, "Just watch your back, Sanada-san. He'll sniff you out before long."

She was reacquainted with that brick wall. Before she could turn to ask how the hell she knew who she was, the door slammed shut behind her. A painful numbness crept into her heart, terrified that she had just walked into a trap of some kind. It was the spark she needed to get moving, fishing out the phone Mitsuru had given her a few days ago. If she was in trouble, she could trust Mitsuru to help her.

But she stopped. Why would Kaori tell her Shido's name and accuse him of the attack on her daughter if she wasn't truthful? Not only that, Sae knew the events of that night could be verified by Amamiya. Not that she wanted to trust *him,* but she had no reason *not* to.

...Perhaps her mysterious caller had done some extensive research and made a call to Kaori so she would expect her. Now that she thought about it, the woman was rather open to a stranger who hadn't even divulged their name.

Akihiko's range of friends would never not surprise her anymore.

But now that she *knew,* Sae could only hope that with Shido's eagerness to keep the rift between her and Akihiko violent, he wouldn't have a clue what she was doing. Her concerns were more focused around Makoto. If Amamiya attracted Shido to him, and he knew about that relationship with Makoto, he would go after her. A double shot against her *and* against Akihiko.

Unfortunately, there wasn't much she could do right now with the information she had gathered. For the time being. At least the rain had slowed to a drizzle as she walked to the station, her head swimming and distracted, yet alert at the same time. She always made sure to stick with crowds and never turn down alleys, but she would get lost in her own mind amongst the commuters around her.

How did one evil man have his hand in everyone's life? From Akihiko, to Makoto, to *her* , and now Amamiya?

Nothing about this turn of events was coincidental. She just didn't know how to connect everything together.

But at least she knew that Akechi was Shido's son. Even then, hearing about his childhood made Sae understand his pain and his anger to some degree. While she would never be able to wish harm upon Akihiko (he was good at finding that himself), she could understand Akechi's rage to kill. But if he wanted to kill his father, to kill Shido, why didn't he do it already?

And how, if true, was Shido involved in the mental shutdowns? Did Shido send Akechi to kill Akihiko in that weird world when his investigation started to get a little too close to home? Why? What was Shido so afraid Akihiko would uncover? And if Akechi really was the one causing them, why was he obeying his father?

"No one should be allowed to use their children as an excuse to do whatever they want."

Or was Akechi trying to befriend his father and kill him after his trust was earned?

...How the hell would Akechi have been able to find his father if no one else on the planet knew the truth?

By the time she returned home, her head was about to explode. She oddly missed a text from Akechi, and having recently learned about his past, it terrified her. It was harmless enough, letting her know he would be back in the office the following day, with an extra message about a sushi party. Strangely, the message calmed her down, seeing that he was oblivious and his usual self, until a third message popped up on her screen.

You'll owe me Kyubey Sushi for what I'm about to surprise you with.

Sae only rolled her eyes. Fancy sushi was all Akechi ever wanted. He could have helped a cat out of a tree and he would have wanted the best…

…No.

There was no way.

"I'll bring you their leader."

There was no way she had managed to find information about Shido and Akechi, and then have her Phantom Thief case brought to an end. She would love to believe that, but…

Too much was going *right* without something going *wrong.*

“They are all innocent. I’ll prove it.”

If Shido was the bad guy and Akechi was his hitman, and both were trying to bring down the Phantom Thieves, what did that mean? Akihiko defended them. Were the Phantom Thieves innocent? Had Shido and Akechi tried to set them up…

Was Akechi the one who killed Okumura?

Maybe she would wake up and everything would have been a dream. Unless Akechi was full of it and he was just trying to bribe her into spending half her savings on a sushi dinner.

But with her recent discovery, she feared there was so much more down the road and this was only the tip of the iceberg.

And that iceberg reared its ugly self when she dropped onto her couch, daily mail in hand, and something stood out to her. It was a postcard, hand delivered, black and red, and words written with the cutout letters she had seen a few times in the past.

It was a calling card. From the Phantom Thieves.

She was their next target.

Chapter 156

Chapter 156

He was a fool for thinking he could actually fall asleep that night.

Akihiko sat down in bed next to Minako, but both of them were wide awake. She was tired, he knew that much from her body language alone and from how she tried to keep a conversation going, then yawned against him.

“I’m not the one who needs to show up for work tomorrow,” she had told him when he tried to persuade her to sleep. So, they opted for silence, his arms around her, and her fingers dancing along the plane of his chest.

He watched the minutes tick by on the clock on the nightstand. With each minute that passed, he tried to find another hole in their plan. He thought of every situation where one thing could go wrong and how they were going to fix it if and when it happened. They had to be perfect. No mistakes. No hesitations. No second guesses. Amamiya was placing great trust in them, and he’d be damned if he let anything happen to him.

It may not be appreciated, but he would rather pull Amamiya from that integration room if he felt something was wrong than wait and hope for the best. It would fuck everything up, but at least he would be alive.

An hour passed. Would Akechi really have the audacity to try and kill Amamiya in the police station? How did Akechi manage to trust people that Akihiko had worked with for *years?* Who was all against him? How could he not *know?* Had this been in the works while he was on leave, or much earlier? Was it a surprise that he came back? Or had that fazed them at all?

Another hour came and went. Would Sae actually *listen* to Amamiya? Would she be thrilled to have her evidence, a confession, and lock him away forever? Or would she hear his story, realize the

game she was involved in, and help him out? Would Amamiya mention Makoto to gain her trust, or would that anger Sae to the point she stormed out?

It was close to midnight when he heard a soft tapping on the bedroom door. Minako was finally asleep next to him, so he did his best not to stir too much to wake her up. Thankfully, Makoto cracked the door open softly and peeked inside just as quietly.

She didn't need to say anything to him. The look in her eyes said it all. Akihiko held up a hand to keep her where she was as he shifted slowly to lay Minako down on the bed. His heart clenched in his chest when she remained asleep, and in his panic, he checked for a pulse in her neck. A wave of relief came over him when he realized she was just extremely tired and not *dead.* He released a slow exhale, carefully moved out of the bed, and made his way to where Makoto was standing in the doorway.

He ushered her out to the living room so they could have a talk without waking her mother. He noticed that Makoto took the seat next to him instead of on a different couch, but he wasn't about to tell her to move. He draped an arm over her shoulders once she was comfortable and waited for her to speak first.

"I can't sleep."

Her voice was quiet. She sounded tired. But he knew exactly how she felt. "Why don't you tell me what's got you so worried that you can't fall asleep?"

Makoto didn't respond right away, likely needing some time to gather her thoughts before she spoke them aloud. "What if…what if Akechi knows we aren't stealing Sis's treasure? What is her treasure? Are we going to give ourselves away? What if Akechi kills Ren once he's caught in the Metaverse? We all have to split up. Akechi will see that. Will he know that Sis's palace is still active? Who's all going to help him? Will Ren be okay with Sis? Will Sis believe him? Will Sis be okay?"

His hand rubbed against her shoulder in an effort to calm her. "I have to say, I've had the same thoughts, too." He sighed, hoping to

come up with the right words to say. “Most of our plan came from speculation and what we thought would be most likely to happen. We can’t rehearse this, or change it to fit our needs for a later date in time. And with what little time we have, there wasn’t much else we could do.”

She was silent again, so he decided to try a different tactic. “Why don’t you walk me through what you’re going to do. Piece by piece. And if you feel like there’s a weak link, tell me how you plan on preparing for it.”

It wasn’t something Makoto thought he would ask. “W-What?”

“Consider it an exam of sorts for when you’re going to graduate from the police academy.” Her eyes widened, but she quickly nodded her head. “What’s the first thing you’re going to do tomorrow?”

He felt her shuffle around until she fell back into her previous position, as if the question had drained her. “Um, I-I guess we have to f-fight…S-Sis first…”

“Wrong.” Makoto looked up at him with a confused expression. “You’re going to eat a good breakfast.”

His comment worked like he hoped it would have, drawing out a smile and a laugh from her. “Yes. Of course.”

“I just wanted you to relax,” he said, pulling her back against him. He also tried to avoid making her talk about her inevitable fight with her sister… “What will you do after the fight is over?”

“We’re going to fake stealing her treasure.”

“And who’s going to distract Akechi so he doesn’t suspect anything?”

“Me and Ren. If it were anyone else, Akechi might get weirded out. He usually only speaks to Ren and myself outside of the Metaverse and when he absolutely has to. That will be when Yusuke and Ryuji will appear to take the treasure.”

So far, she was doing very well. “What happens next?”

He felt a smile turn on his lips when Makoto brought a hand to her chin. “Futaba. Once Ryuji and Yusuke have secured the treasure, she’s going to alert us to the police. Assuming they really are there.”

“And if they aren’t?”

It was painful to ask, but they could come up with something together if need be. “Fuuka will communicate that with us. If they don’t arrive, we are to stay together and leave just like we usually do. We will regroup at Leblanc as soon as possible and we will devise a new strategy from there.”

Impressive. They must have done a lot of work after he left. “Alright then. You have the treasure. The police are waiting to ambush you. Now what?”

He noticed that her responses were coming more naturally off the tongue. “We split up. Fuuka and Mitsuru can track Akechi afterwards. I will keep the briefcase with the decoy treasure since Akechi will assume I want to be the one to take it out. Futaba will track Ren to make sure Akechi is not going to take him by surprise. Fuuka will keep us informed on Akechi and we will all leave the Metaverse separately once Ren is caught.”

“What are you going to do if Akechi gets too close to Amamiya?”

“I’m going to beat him to death.”

Akihiko couldn’t help but laugh at how quickly she answered him. “That’s my girl.”

“Once we have all returned, I guess all we do is wait. A-And hope for the best.”

He thought it would be a good idea to go over the last half of the plan. “Amamiya is caught. Thrown into an interrogation room. Akechi’s little pawns will try and get answers out of him. Sae shows up to demand a chance to talk to him, since he’s the big fish she’s been trying to catch for several months. They’ll have a nice chat. Catch up. Sae will smack him over the head for bringing up the fact that you two are dating.”

“D-Dad!” She pushed off of him with narrowing eyes. “Ren knows not to talk about us. Mitsuru explicitly told him to leave out our names.”

He waved his hand. “Probably for the best then, huh? I would hate for Amamiya to return to you with bruises and broken bones because he pissed off your sister.”

This time, his joke didn’t land. “Do you…do you really think he’s going to be okay?”

“You know,” he started, leaning back against the couch, his head tilted up at the ceiling. “When we originally came up with this idea, I would have told you no. I tried to fight Mitsuru about it. He’s so young, has so much of his life ahead of him, so why would he agree to something like this? He doesn’t even know us all that well. She was practically sending him on a suicide mission.”

Makoto waited impatiently for him to continue. “But when he looked at me and told me he wasn’t going to let his fear control his actions, I knew then that everything would be okay.” He looked back over at her. “He’s a great kid, Makoto. He was given his powers for a reason, because he could change so much of this world, and now he has the determination to set it all in motion. I trust him. I trust Sae. And if I keep telling myself that, hopefully that will be enough to keep them safe.”

He didn’t know how much that helped ease her tensions, but the change on her face made him feel better at least. “A-And you really trust Sis?”

“I do,” he stated more matter of factly than he thought he would have. “I’ve noticed a change in her recently. She’s questioning things that she hadn’t been concerned about before. She’s noticing things happening around her that she had been blind to for months. And no matter what she says or how she acts, I know she’s still in there. She cares about you so much, Makoto. She would sacrifice her whole career if that meant keeping you safe. I know she would.”

There was a somewhat comfortable silence that fell around them. Makoto rested against him while he let his words sink into his mind.

If there was one thing he knew Sae to be, it was a wonderful sister. From the day Makoto was born, Sae was right there. Protecting her. Teaching her. Supporting her. Sae could have been abrasive from time to time, but that didn't change the fact that she loved Makoto dearly. He actually thought that Sae's love for her sister was what kept him out of prison and Makoto off of her radar when it came to the Phantom Thieves. So while it might not be the best avenue to take if Amamiya mentioned his relationship with Makoto, it could also save him more than anything.

There was still so much that he worried about, but between his chat with Minako earlier and his current one with Makoto, he could have fallen asleep for a good couple of hours.

Until there was a pounding on the front door that scared the hell out of him. Wide-eyed and jolted awake as well, Makoto was about to ask him who it possibly could have been at this hour, but Akihiko held up a hand. He had left his phone on the nightstand in his room, so if anyone had called or texted him about a late-night chat, he wouldn't have known. Whoever was at the door was *pissed,* banging loudly and more frequently. There was no way Mitsuru would act so rashly, even if the situation was dire. In fact, the only people he thought would try and wake him from the dead were the two people in the apartment with him…

His heart stopped beating. He couldn't even tell Makoto to go back to her room and let him handle it on his own.

Just like he thought, Sae was standing on the other side of the door, seething and shaking in a rage. "Do you think this is *funny?!"*

"Sis?"

There was a small part of him that worried Sae would lose her shit when she got the calling card that night. Mitsuru had told him that she was out of town, so he thought she wouldn't see it until morning. Even so, he didn't think she would approach the issue like *this* .

He tried to play dumb while acting like he would when he was afraid of her. "Wh-What are you talking about?"

Without wasting a second, she threw the card at him, then grabbed him by the collar of his shirt. “Is this your idea of a *joke?!* To send a criminal organization to *kill* me because you can’t face the fact that you’re *guilty?!”*

She was furious. He hadn’t seen her this angry since she slammed her door when she told him she hated him all those years ago. And to come out this late at night…

Sae was probably scared. In a sense, he had sent “murderers” to her doorstep. It hurt more than he wanted to admit. “I need you to trust me, Sae.”

She threw him back with enough strength that Makoto had to catch him before he tripped on his own feet. “Trust you!? They *killed* Okumura! How could you ask me to *trust you!?”*

His heart was cracking with every second she glared at him. Makoto was quick to try and jump to his defense. “Please. Don’t do this, Sis.”

“You stay out of this, Makoto.” Sae’s rage refocused on him. “I did trust you. For that half a second of my life where I thought maybe you were right. But *of course* you would be waiting for me to lower my guard. *Of course* you would want to pull me under when I have been so close to ending this madness! *Of course* you would want to keep me from the truth and take all the credit for yourself because I’m not *your daughter!”*

It was difficult to face her, but he had to. If not for his own sake, then for Makoto’s, and even for Amamiya. “Please, Sae. I need you to trust me right now. No one is going to hurt you. You’ll get all of your answers. Everything is going to be fine.”

Sae narrowed her eyes even further. “Then you’ll have no problems telling me who these people are, since you *trust* them so much.”

“No.”

“I won’t ask again.”

“…Sis…”

But he held steadfast. Because it was all for the best. Right? “I’m not going to say anything.”

“Fine.” Her eyes shifted to land on Makoto off to his side. The rage was still radiating from her, like she was standing in a burning fire. “If your father can seal my fate with a death wish, then I highly suggest you get as far away from here as you can, Makoto. I’d hate to have you go through this hell because you trusted someone who was supposed to *love* you and keep you safe.”

It was the final tear to his heart. Akihiko reached out and grabbed Sae’s arm just as she was turning to walk away. His grip was tight in case she tried to pull away from him. “I do love you, Sae. I’m doing this because I love you so much that it *hurts* . This is going to be the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do in my life. But I would face your wrath a million times over because I know you’ll be *safe.”*

“I know you don’t really hate Dad, Sis.” Makoto took her chance to move in front of him as his arm fell back to his side. “And I also know that you’re here because you’re scared. Dad promised he would protect you. So if you don’t want to trust Dad, trust me. I-I may be weak and naïve at times, but I love you, too, Sis.”

There were some conflicting emotions he saw in Sae’s eyes, but she shook her head and they were gone. “What part of ‘they killed Okumura’ do you *still* not understand?”

“Sae.” He waited until she looked right at him. “Trust me.”

She held his gaze for at least a minute. Then, with a heavy heart, he watched her turn away, getting one last shot in on him before she disappeared. “I hate you.”

Akihiko gently closed the door once Sae was gone, then stood in his place, speechless. Sae was angry, or worse yet, terrified, but it was hard to know if she really trusted him now. He’d like to think so, given her emotions as the conversation continued. She may have told him she hated him, but there was hesitation, like she was saying it because she didn’t know what else to say.

Makoto bent over to pick the calling card up off the floor. “I was so

happy that I got the chance to deliver this to her without seeing her. I was afraid that if I had to hand it to her, face to face, that I wouldn't be able to go through with it."

She turned to him then, a familiar fire burning in her eyes. "I know why Ren put his faith in you. You always worry about the what ifs, but when push comes to shove, you fight back. You could have cowered like you did when Sae came over for Christmas, but you didn't. You could have told her the truth right now, but you didn't. Your actions are influencing those around you, and more and more people are coming to our side because you didn't give up, because you *still* won't give up."

Her words knocked the breath out of him. He would have no idea where he would be at in life had it not been for Minako and Makoto. Their strength when he least expected it was his greatest blessing. "I guess I have you to thank for that." He placed his hand on her head, smiling because he was proud. "I wouldn't have made a stand if you wouldn't have pushed me."

Makoto soon wrapped him in a powerful hug. "I remember that night in the bar, where you told me you were one man and couldn't bring down Shido and his accomplices. In a month's time, you went from having a few people behind you to having several people behind you. By the end of the year, you'll have even more. Together, we will stop those who thought they could continue to hurt others for personal gratification."

The way she said it, so seriously, so proudly, it made his chest swell with pride. Anything would be possible if she was there with him. Nothing would bring him down if Minako stood at his other side. Hopefully, after all was said and done, they could fight together with Sae and be a force to be reckoned with.

"I'll save Sis, Dad," Makoto whispered into his chest, like she was trying to tattoo her promise on his heart. "With our family as one again, no one will be able to stop us."

It was a dream he no longer hoped for, but would fight for.

Chapter 157

Chapter 157

No matter how many times she went over the details of the plan for the next day, Makoto still thought it wasn't *enough.*

Would Akechi know something was up? Would he try and kill Ren as soon as he was caught by the police? Was Ren really as confident as he had made it seem after Mitsuru had left that night? What else could have gone wrong that they weren't *prepared* for?

Makoto felt terrible for her mother the next morning, having cooked a very nice spread of food for breakfast, but she couldn't eat half as much as she wanted to. Had it not been for her dad literally telling her to shove food in her mouth, she probably wouldn't have eaten at all. Her mom boxed up a few things for her lunch, kissed her on the head, and told her that while she may not have eaten much for breakfast, she could eat a little more as the day went on.

Her dad surprised her and took her part of the way to school.

"I know you're worried," he said after exiting the train in Shibuya. "I wish I could take them all away for you, or promise this will be a piece of cake. But I can't." She felt his eyes on her, so she looked up at him. His smile was weak, but it was there. "Believe in yourself and your instincts. Trust in your friends. This will all be over soon."

A part of her didn't want to let him go when he gave her a brief hug. Once he walked away, she would be on her own. That weight would fall squarely on her shoulders and crush her. No amount of strength and training could prepare her for that responsibility…

But he didn't walk away. Her hand shot up to her necklace, trying to act like it was just a normal day and her sister and Ren weren't about to be taken away from her for good.

Then, her dad did something she never saw coming. "I won't let anything happen to him. If I feel like things are going south, I'll get

him out of there. I promise."

Makoto stood in her place, staring out at the platform, shocked. He sounded so serious. She never envisioned him as someone who would veer off course from a plan he worked so hard to come up with. At the same time, it helped her relax tremendously. Not that she wouldn't work hard to save *everyone* , but at least there was a back-up in case she failed spectacularly.

"I'm not about to have another person's blood on my hands just because I ignored the signs around me."

There was a look in his eyes she had never seen before, and it was slightly intimidating. She thought she should thank him, or tell him that everything would go well, or something upbeat, but she was shook up at the tone in his voice. Had he been in a similar situation in the past, and he lost someone? Was he referring to his friend? Or another case?

"I-It will be okay, Dad…"

He must have sensed he was speaking out loud, turning to her quickly when she spoke so tentatively. "Ah, sorry." He rubbed the back of his head, kind of like Ren would do when he was nervous. "Just don't forget that we're all here for you, all of you. Alright?"

All she could do was nod her head in return. She felt a little better when he placed a hand on her shoulder, a sign that he trusted her, he knew she would be okay, and at the end of the day, the fight would be over.

Her dad left her at the next station to ride the rest of the way to school in silence. The entire time, she grabbed hold of the pendant he had given her like it was his hand and she was five. There was nothing she needed to worry about. Her parents' friends had been wonderful help, and were still getting every little detail finalized. All she really had to do was act like herself, and everything would be okay.

She must have been well enough together as she walked into the school building. Some students waved at her, said good morning,

did nothing. No one seemed to realize she was a nervous *wreck* under the surface. At least school would be distracting, a chance for her to get out of her mind, quiz herself on her lunch break, focus on lecture again, then put her instincts to the ultimate test.

If she succeeded, her family would be complete and happy. They would catch Akechi and finally capture those after her dad.

If she failed, she would lose her sister. She would lose Ren. She would lose everything.

“Hey you.”

And speaking of Ren, he looked pretty well composed, given what his future was going to be. He smiled at her like normal, spoke to her like normal, honestly acted far too normal… “H-Hi, Ren…”

He did look tired. She envied how he could lose so much sleep and still keep himself together. “Let’s have lunch today.”

Why? Would it be their last? Was he going to tell her that he couldn’t put his life on the line for her family’s sake? Her mind raced with questions and fears, but she forgot who she was dealing with. She heard a quiet laugh, then a warmth wrapped around her hand.

“You’re super cute, you know that?”

Instead of her usual reaction, she felt a crack form in her heart. “How can you act like this right now?”

His hand continued to hold on to hers. “Because I feel at peace when I’m standing next to you.” Her eyes lifted to his face, which was when he turned away. “I barely slept last night. I was pacing at the station. My heart is about to explode. My brain is running on fumes. But right now, there’s nothing else in the world but me and you.” He looked back to her again. “I want to be with you again. Tomorrow. Next week. Next year. And I’ll be damned if I’m going to let anyone take that away from me.”

She was so caught off guard that she couldn’t think of anything to say to him. His arm wrapped around her back, pulling her against him. “I want to take you out on another date. I want to have you

make me dinner, and I want to successfully make you dinner. I want to watch you turn into the person you've been working so hard to become. This is why I want to fight. This is why I trust everyone. This is why I know we're going to win. Because our bonds are *real* , not won over with money and false promises."

Ren always looked like he had everything together. Very rarely did he seem angry or afraid, even when the circumstances would have frightened any other person. But he rarely spoke like this. He may have thought it, but it was never vocalized. He always thought time was the most precious thing to offer someone. And now, he was offering her all the reasons *she* had to fight back. No more pulling herself down. Like he had just said, she would be damned if she let someone take something so precious away from her because she hesitated.

With students slowly making their way to class, she couldn't kiss him or hug him or anything she really wanted. He noticed as much, so he squeezed her hand once before he released her. She was thankful that she was able to find her voice in that moment. "I love you, Ren."

The smile he wore split his face and he laughed like he wasn't about to face the possibility of death. "I love you, too."

Makoto never spaced out in class, nor was she anything but attentive, but she allowed herself this one day (second day, really, but she had no time to think about that) to zone out. Instead of taking notes, she wrote down everyone's names and what they were going to be doing that afternoon. If she was still doubting something, she wrote that down, then followed up with a solution. She went as far as attempting to draw a stick figure of Akechi and adding tears to his face because he was going to be so sad his plan wouldn't work.

Ren had the right attitude. She would not disappoint him.

She jumped in her seat when the lunch bell rang through the halls, but she was quick to gather her notes and run out of the room. She moved so much faster than she had done in the past, and she worried that maybe she was attracting attention. However, any minute she had to spare, she wanted to be with Ren. Those

moments were going to be far and few between soon. As much as the thought scared her, she shook her head and reminded herself that she would still be able to see him.

When she reached the second floor, she found Ren standing with Ryuji, both of whom were speaking to Ken. Curious to know what the elder's presence meant, Makoto quickened her pace to come up right behind him. Ken turned to her, but no one was talking about anything important. Ren, however, smiled brightly before he said something to Ryuji she couldn't hear.

Ryuji gave him a thumbs up. Ken shot her a look that made her warm inside. Ren was quick to usher her away from the two of them. "Ryuji needs help in his class. Amada said he would tutor him."

They were heading up the stairs when Makoto turned over to him. "I-Is everything…okay?"

Ryuji wasn't the smartest student at Shujin, but he always got by without help. Him choosing this exact moment to have a tutor struck her as odd. Were the two of them really going to study? Was it code for something else? Had something been discussed before she had a chance to listen in?

"Ryuji's all over the place, so Amada said he could offer to tutor him to distract him." Ren's pause almost had her asking what else they talked about. She didn't get the chance to question him. Her thoughts ran rampant in the silence. The cooler air struck her in the face when they stepped outside, but it wasn't enough to ease the dread forming in her stomach.

That dread began to make her sick when Ren wrapped his arms around her and held her tightly against his chest. He said nothing. She *couldn't* say anything. She was hoping to have a relatively peaceful lunch with him and not fall back into the pit of despair he had pulled her out of that morning.

His laugh, however, helped her find her voice. "What's wrong?"

He kissed the top of her head. "I'm scared. To be frank." He squeezed her again. "It's strange to say that out loud, but I am. I can

tell you all I want how confident I feel about what's going to happen, that nothing in this world will ever take you away from me, but then I'm reminded that I'm just a kid with weird powers and someone really wants to kill me."

Her hands around his back grabbed at his jacket, willing herself not to cry at the desperation in his voice. He had been strong for her so many times in the past. She had to be strong for him this *once.* "I won't let anything happen to you, Ren. I promise. I've gone over everything in my head so many times. I know what to do. Everyone else knows what to do. You'll be okay."

He chuckled, and it sent a chill down her spine. "I know what I need to do. And if I really do die, and it saves your sister, I'll at least know it wasn't in-,"

She punched him square in the stomach. She allowed him to cough on his breath for a second or two before she grabbed his lapels and pulled his face into hers. "Don't you *ever* say that. You're not going to die! I won't let you! I'll beat Akechi into a bloody pulp in the palace before I ever let him get close to you! I won't…"

He silenced her with a kiss. It was soft and simple at first. The more she could tell he was clinging to her, the more she tried to reach him through their kiss. Her arms moved to wrap around his shoulders, her hands working in his hair, knowing that it helped to calm him down. She felt like their roles had reversed. He was gripping her out of fear and anxiousness. She was the one who worked to soothe him while emphasizing that she was there and nothing would hurt him.

He was the one who finally pulled away, but not far enough that she could look at him. He buried his face in the crook of her neck, still holding onto her with all his strength. Seeing him like this broke her heart, but it also reminded her that he was very much human with the same feelings she had. Except he was the one going off on a limb to trust people she had known most of her life. And he was the one who was facing death. She was only facing the fear of losing him.

"Sorry…" His voice was so quiet that she thought she only heard

what he said from how his mouth moved against her neck. He didn't try and pull away, and she was more than happy to keep brushing her fingers through his hair and leave butterfly kisses anywhere she could. It helped him to slowly find his breathing, but she worried with his loosening grip that he would pull away from her and she would never get to hold him again.

"We should eat something." Ren leaned back, but he at least didn't release her. He looked so tired.

Makoto tried to break the tension that had built up. "My dad always likes to remind me that you can't fight bad guys on an empty stomach. S-So…" She had to let him go so she could reach into her bag and grab the box her mom had packed for her that morning. "Consider this a small preview of what I will make for you once this is all over."

Ren may have been exhausted, but seeing the glow return to his eyes and the smile on his face made her feel like she could do anything. They both took a seat where they had sat months before, a time when she thought she could do everything on her own. A time when she thought she had to prove so much to her father, then got the wake-up call of her life. It was nostalgic, in some dark, twisted way, to be back where her real first Phantom Thief adventure had started.

"You know, you punched me in the stomach the last time we were up here, just the two of us."

Makoto could feel the blush burning her skin. "U-Uh, I-I guess so…"

He smirked at her as his eyes took in the small assortment of food between them. "You were trying to prove a point then, kind of like you are doing now."

She didn't know what he was getting at, so she chose not to comment on it and began eating. She wasn't overly hungry, but her parents' voices were drowning out her own. *You can't fight bad guys on an empty stomach.*

"Thank you, Makoto."

A piece of fruit fell from her lips. “H-Huh?”

Ren breathed out a laugh. “When I feel like I’m drowning in my own fears, you’re always right there to save me. Just like when you reached out to me the first day I met you. Or when Okumura died and I thought I was going to go back to jail. I meant what I said to you this morning.” His eyes hardened, and it took her breath away. “Nothing is going to take you away from me.”

It was unfortunate that the warning bell rang and she couldn’t say as much in return. Instead, she passed the remainder of the lunch to him, earning her a confused expression. “My dad forced me to eat this morning. I’m sure you could use it more than me.”

He slowly nodded his head and came to his feet. Her heart sank in her stomach. Then, he came to stand behind where she still sat, and wrapped his arms around her shoulders. “I am so excited to have you cook for me. So you pick a night you have time and I will be there.”

Her hands came to rest against his arms and she leaned into his shoulder. “You have to tell me what you want first.”

“Ah, man, put me on the spot.” He made a humming noise, letting her know he was thinking. It made her laugh. “My favorite dish as a child was okonomiyaki. I haven’t had it in years. And I’d be more than happy to help.”

As hard as it was to do, Makoto pushed herself to her feet. As soon as she was standing, she reached over and grabbed Ren’s hand. “You’re not allowed to help. You’ll only be distracting.”

His laugh cleared up the remaining tension lingering in the air. Before she could turn to head back inside, he tugged on her hand to give her another hug. “I wish I had something clever to say to that,” he said with another laugh, then planted a kiss to her head. They walked back into the school in silence, but she felt so much better than she thought she would. Ren was in a better mood. She could make him laugh, even with what was awaiting him. And if that wasn’t true strength, what was?

Ren was the one who reached her first after the last bell. She had told her council that she would be out that day, so she could head over to the courthouse as slowly as possible as soon as school was over. He stepped into the classroom when she didn't get up and all the other students were out. She took a deep breath, released it, then came to her feet.

"I'm alright, Ren," she told him, hoping to keep those undying concerns deep in her heart. "Is everyone ready?"

They were all supposed to head over together, to meet Akechi in Kasumigaseki, so they could fine tune anything anyone had thought about that day. It also gave everyone a chance to come together to support Ren and give him comfort. She had hogged him all to herself that day, and it was rude, so she couldn't ask for him to do the same on their final trip to her sister's palace.

He grabbed her hand. "I was selfish today, and I'm sorry. I know this isn't just about me, but your entire family."

She released a breath, exhaling all of her doubts with it. "It's okay. I know Sis is strong, but my dad really does believe she's still there. She's wanted the truth from him for months, but had she heard it from him, she would have buried him with it. Having to speak to you, she's going to be less irrational and angry and only be there for the truth. I know he wouldn't let you go through with this had he felt she was favoring the enemy."

He gave her another warm smile, then pulled on her hand to get her moving. "Don't forget who you're fighting with either."

It was time to settle everything. She felt ready, although sick to her stomach, trying to remember every little detail. They couldn't rehearse this moment, which was a setback for her, but she was sure if she memorized the plan, her instincts would kick in to cover for her when her mind blanked. However, the part she often overlooked was the fact they had to *fight* her sister. The same person she watched fight when Sae was in high school and her mom had taken her to one of her matches. The same person that took her out to cafes and let her get whatever she wanted. The same person who comforted her after a nightmare, or during a

terrible storm. The same person who dropped everything she was doing to run out and make sure she was okay when that policeman tried to arrest her…

A hand grabbed hers when she was sitting on the train. Ren stood in front of her, so it wasn't him. She turned to find Haru giving her a weak smile, but it spoke volumes to her. Makoto gave her hand a light squeeze, a quiet thank you, and left her thoughts unspoken.

One step at a time. Making sure they defeated Sae without injuries had to come first. She could worry about Ren as soon as she knew that her sister was okay.

Haru never released her hand, even after they had exited the train at Kasumigaseki Station. Makoto didn't mind. In fact, she felt like she clung to her friend more than she thought she would have. It reminded her of the time that Ren and Ryuji had gone with her to take care of her dad's shadow. Just like that terrifying time, if she didn't defeat Sae now, she ran the risk of losing her altogether. She wasn't alone. It wasn't just her battle to fight and to win. She trusted Mitsuru and her father enough to know that what she told Ren was the truth: they wouldn't have asked any of them to do anything they knew wouldn't work.

Now, it was time to put their trust to the test.

Akechi greeted them as he normally would. While Makoto didn't expect him to be nearly as nervous as she was, this was also the first time they had spoken to him since they found out about his plot to kill Ren. It was extremely difficult not to end his life at that moment. However, Haru's hand gave hers a light tug, pulling her back down to earth. She gave her friend a light nod of her head before she turned to face Akechi with less hostility than she had given off previously.

"Are you ready?"

His smile twisted her stomach. There was nothing to be *happy* about. "Are you?"

"I am." She was ready to put an end to his destruction. She was

ready to help Haru and Futaba get justice for the pain he brought to them. She was ready to help her dad nail everyone Akechi worked with to the cross. She was ready to prove to herself what she was capable of.

Ren gave her a smile that told her he felt the same, and she knew that as long as they were all together, they would win.

Chapter 158

Chapter 158

You can do this.

The transition into the Metaverse was never a pleasant ride. It never made her physically sick, but staring up at her sister's palace made her swallow the bile rising in her throat.

"Well, Phantom Thieves." Akechi's voice turned that sickness into a strong desire to punch him in the face. "Let's make your final mission a successful one."

He moved on ahead, to which Makoto was grateful. Her hand was clenched at her side, ready for the right chance to strike. Akechi walking away was a good thing for the both of them. However, once that urge had died, she was surrounded by the reality that was facing her. Akechi could sound as confident as he wanted to, but he knew nothing about the powerhouse that was her sister.

In fact, no one did.

"Sis might be a dangerous threat in the real world, and she may have used several cheats to try and destroy us." She exhaled deeply, hoping to clear the disturbing images of a sister that wasn't who she remembered. "But she's still a strong person to go up against. We shouldn't ever take her lightly."

Ann was the one who commented first. "Must run in the family, huh?"

"Ah, man. If she's trained with Sanada too, we're dead!"

Ryuji's remark made her laugh to herself. Sae may have loathed their father since she was old enough to remember, but she always took his advice into consideration. While their father never physically trained Sae like he did her, he still pushed her to become stronger. Plus, Sae was more the independent type. She trained alone. She

studied on her own. She basically found her own path and achieved it on her own.

It suddenly made her sad. Did Sae not think anyone would be there for her if she asked? Her dad had tried, even when she was younger, but Sae was so angry that he eventually stopped asking. Makoto could admit to being selfish as a child, only wanting to play with Sis when she wanted to. Or jumping in bed with Sis when she was afraid of the thunder and lightning. When had Sae ever gone to her to vent or talk to?

That had started to change recently, so Makoto knew there was hope. All she had to do now was stand her ground, defeat her in battle, and let her realize the truth for herself.

Haru helped to break the ice that had formed amongst her friends. She probably shouldn't have retreated into herself when they were only trying to help. "We have Queen on our side! With her here, everything is going to be just fine!"

Her voice made her blush slightly under her mask.

Ryuji nodded in agreement. "We've done it once. We'll do it again! Let's kick some ass!"

Makoto did her best to smile, to tell them without words that she appreciated all their energy and commitment. They had helped her defeat her father's shadow. They would help her defeat her sister's. Whenever she felt like she was losing her ground, they would straighten her out. They were fighting with her, and she would not let them down.

It was her duty as Sae's sister to bring her around. She couldn't tell her that if she cowered in battle. Makoto knew she wasn't going to be fighting one on one, but she wasn't about to let everyone bear that burden for her.

"Let's go."

Like usual, Ren was the one to lead the way into the palace walls. Makoto made sure to follow behind him, with Haru on her other side.

They were the two people she sought comfort in the most. It was also nice to keep her distance from Akechi, lest she give into that impulse and attack him when it wasn't necessary. He would get his just desserts in the end. She just had to be patient now.

It was a blessing and a curse that they couldn't fight anyone on their way up to the top floor. She was on edge, and punching something would have given her something to focus on. At the same time, not only would being caught increase their chances of getting kicked out, it would also wear them out. They *had* to be at their best, not only during their fight with Sae, but afterwards as well.

She focused on her breathing instead. In the silence of the elevator ride, she closed her eyes and counted to five with an inhale, releasing it at the same pace. She repeated that cycle until the *ding* signaled they had reached the top floor. That was when she felt a warmth in her hand, and a light pressure she had grown comfortable with.

All she could do was look over her shoulder to Ren, who never made eye contact with her, but smiled like he would when he was trying to cheer her up. When he began to follow after the others, she gently squeezed his hand to let him know she appreciated it. Letting him go was one of the hardest things she had to do, but she wouldn't let Akechi see it.

The second they were inside the treasure room, Makoto felt the air around her start to materialize as a pair of hands and choke her. It was difficult to breathe, or move, or speak to let someone know she was suffocating. It was as if all of those doubts and questions that had built up ever since she discovered Sae's palace were pulling at her at the same time…

"What do you think her treasure will be?"

It was a rare time where she appreciated Akechi's voice. It tore through the pressure crushing her and gave her a distraction. She hated him, and she wanted him to hurt so badly, and that made her come back to reality. He would suffer. He would face justice. He would never mess with her family or friends ever again.

Ren answered for her. “We’ll find out soon enough.”

It was also something she rarely thought about, since thinking about Sae’s treasure reminded her that she had a palace. What would her treasure be? Would it be from a time period when she was angry with their dad? Makoto knew that their different last names was the breaking point at first, but then it became the distance he put between them. However, the only time their father had really been mentioned in the palace recently had been when they faced the shadow of their mother. But if Sae had a palace for that long, why was it a casino and not something else? Sae wasn’t obsessed with winning until she got her job…

If that were the case, what would the treasure be? Her law degree? Her new job? A casefile that started her descent?

“I have to say, I’m impressed you’ve managed to beat the odds to find me here.”

It was a sucker punch to the gut. The giant TV monitor above them flickered with the image of her sister’s shadow smirking at them. It had happened frequently as they moved throughout the palace, but this one hit her the hardest. There was nowhere left for Sae to go. And she knew that, even if the expression on her face said differently.

“We’re going to defeat you, Sae-san.” Akechi took a step forward. “You will see the error of your ways.”

Shut up.

Her sister laughed. “If you really think you can defeat me, then please, come right in and try.”

The door opened loudly, scaring her half to death. It was the moment she had been waiting for. Her chance to set her sister back on the right path. To bring her back to the family she had left so many years ago. She could do this. She *had* to do this.

Her body felt heavy again as she struggled to follow everyone inside. The last time she came face to face with her sister’s shadow

had been the first time she entered with her friends. Sae did nothing but mock them then, and it came as a huge relief. But she knew her sister could snap, like she had done the initial trip when she attacked their dad. However, Makoto knew her sister well enough to know that if she wanted something taken care of, she would do it herself.

They wouldn't be fighting a hoard of shadows like they had done in Okumura's palace.

They would be fighting Sae herself.

Makoto took her place behind Ren. It wasn't abnormal, and she found security in being as close to him as she could. That all changed when she took in the room. A giant roulette wheel covered the ground in front of them. And standing in the center was her sister.

"Welcome to my lair." Sae showcased the room like it was the most important thing in the world. How had she gotten so corrupt without anyone noticing? "And here, your defeat is inevitable."

A part of her grew angry when Akechi took his place next to Ren. He had no right to think this was *his* battle to win. Sae wasn't his *sister!* "You've become so obsessed with winning that you've failed to see that you've already lost." She saw his hands tighten at his sides. "No matter what you throw at us, we are all ready to defeat you. The odds are in our favor."

She almost laughed at him. Sae narrowed her eyes at the group and her heart stopped beating. "You act like you know what it's like to beat the odds. To believe in a system that was supposed to protect, and it *failed* you. To believe in the *people* who were supposed to protect you! To know there's no way out and you have to save yourself!"

The raw anger in Sae's voice began to literally radiate off her body. Makoto tried to make sense of what Sae was talking about, but she feared that "people" was a reference to their father, and possibly *her.* Her mother's shadow had tried to stop her that day, and failed, so was Sae mad about that, too?

“You made your choice to forgive the bastard that destroyed my daughter’s life, who destroyed my life!”

“You will *never* defeat me because I *am* true justice!”

Her sister let out an agonizing scream that paralyzed her to her spot. Makoto expected to have to fight Sae’s shadow, but the thing that now stood before them was a *demon.* It was three times bigger, wielding a massive machine gun and a broadsword in its hands. If she had half the brain to think, she would question why the shadow had more power in its hands than its legs, since Sae was a skilled aikido fighter. But, all she could do was stare out in front of her, unable to move or breathe or *think.*

This must have been how her dad had felt when they first came into Sae’s palace. The weight of the guilt, the sorrow, the terror that she had done *nothing* to prevent this change made her feel lifeless. It was something straight out of one of the horror movies Sae had made her watch as a child, then laughed at her when she cried because she was scared.

Well, she thought she was crying. She was scared for sure. But her sister wasn’t willing to apologize or wrap her in her favorite Buchimaru blanket and read her a bedtime story or help her sneak into their mother’s secret stash of candy to keep Makoto from telling their parents that Sae had scared her again or…

“Look out!”

Makoto was blindsided as she was tackled to the ground. She had very little time to figure out what had happened. Ren hovered over her, his eyes narrowed at her, and it helped her come to her senses.

“You have to save her, Makoto.” She could feel her eyes burning while his eyes continued to darken. “You have to. You promised to bring her back!”

His tone cut right through her. This wasn’t the same sister that read stories to her or took pleasure in scaring her to death. This wasn’t the same sister that went out of her way to keep her safe, even if Makoto brought it upon herself.

This wasn't *her* sister. She might still be locked away, but she needed help. And for once in her life, Makoto wanted to help *her.* The same way she was able to help her dad. The same way she was able to help Ren. Sae's new change shook her up and brought a new wave of fear into her heart, but thanks to Ren, she had something to hold onto once more.

"Y-You're right." He was at least kind enough to help her sit up, then she noticed him check her for injuries. Realizing she wasn't hurt, he breathed out a sigh of relief and pushed himself to his feet.

"We need you, Queen." She was more than willing to accept his hand to help her up. "And she needs her sister."

All she did was nod her head and wipe her eyes dry. After that, she was the person her team expected her to be in every fight. She took a second or two to find everyone, to watch them fire off physical and elemental attacks, to watch the demon's movements and reactions to each one.

She stood still for too long. The demon's eyes found her again, likely assuming she was an easy target to take out, but Makoto wouldn't let that fear seize her heart a second time. With a quick touch to her mask, she threw herself on Johanna and easily evaded the blade of the sword. While she was glad to have escaped the devastating attack, it was nothing to celebrate over. She turned the bike to face what used to be her sister, revved up the engine, then before she got cold feet, she charged on ahead.

The demon was powerful, yes, but with the upper body strength came weakened speed. It was something she had learned from her dad. He had been an upper body fighter, but he always stressed to her the importance of good footwork and agility. A good fighter never sacrificed one for the other. There may never be a perfect balance, and in this situation, Makoto hoped those scales were favoring the upper body.

She barely managed to avoid the bullets, and when she was right inside that bubble of weakness, she attacked. A nuclear attack to the legs knocked the demon back enough that she jumped off Johanna and landed a clean strike on the underside of its chin.

It was the same move she used against her father. But, it didn't work like she hoped it would have.

The demon felt the blow, she was sure of that, but the retaliation caught Makoto off guard. Before she could land on her feet, it swung its hand (thankfully the one with the gun) and knocked her to the far side of the wheel. She lost her breath. The world went black for a few seconds. She thought she broke a few ribs.

She felt something at her side, then a green light encased her until she was good as new. Morgana hopped in his place, happy to see her coming to her feet. "That was really impressive, but don't forget you're not alone."

The rest of her team had bought her more time with bullets and long-distance attacks. The demon took them all like a wall, and it was hard to know if anything was even effective. It shouldn't surprise her, since this was a twisted form of the darkness in her own sister, but even with all of them combined, they were doing very little apparent damage. Her attack had likely only been successful since she got so close.

They would have to bring the battle into that weak area like she had done. All of them wouldn't make it. She would. Maybe someone else.

"I know what you're thinking."

She was quick to throw a hand to her mouth to cover her scream, a reflex that came naturally. Ren came up behind her, laughed quietly to himself at her reaction, then shook his head. "We need to get in close, but *we* can't. *You* can, but you're not pulling a stunt like that again without someone else."

"And I'm assuming you're going to think I'm going to ask you to take this risk with me?"

He grinned madly at her. "You're not going with Akechi, and I'm pretty sure he's going to jump next in line if you turn me down."

It would make sense. Akechi was somewhat close with Sae, so he

likely felt, to some degree, that he needed to get a final shot in. She refused to let him get *one* shot in. Plus, she trusted Ren. He could listen to her plan, then make his own changes without messing anything up. She was sure it also wouldn't come as a surprise to anyone else that the two head-strong and sometimes stubborn strategists would take the lead.

Plus, it was *her sister* . Ren wouldn't let her do this with anyone else.

"Fine." He already knew her answer, so while the others continued their barrage of attacks as a distraction, Makoto called forth Johanna. "If one of us takes the hit, the other can land the last strike. It has to be powerful. I doubt it will let us close a third time."

His arms wrapped around her waist, causing her to tense for half a second. At least he didn't say anything to her, and she thought it best to make the advance as quickly as possible before there was a chance for the demon to catch her.

With its back turned to her, Makoto repeated her charge while she had the time. It noticed her a second later, but it was a second too late. In fact, it reacted just like she hoped it would, turning and lifting its massive arms to defend its weakness. Her nuclear attack hit the same mark it had last time, and without a word, Ren jumped up into the monster's line of sight, raising his gun to fire a point-blank shot.

He took the chance he had, blinding the demon with a direct hit in between the eyes. When it fell to its knees, reeling in pain, Makoto nodded once to the others. Ren made her intentions clear with his voice.

"Now!"

Everything after was a blur. They all knew what to do, and thankfully, no one hesitated. In a matter of seconds, the demon was ripped apart by the hundreds of kicks, punches, and slashes of all her friends.

It was over.

Makoto did a quick glance around her to make sure everyone was

okay. No one seemed to be hurt, even if they were slower to get up than in a normal fight. It took a few seconds to stand on her feet, but when her eyes caught the sight of her sister on the ground, her muscles kicked into overdrive. She ran up to Sae, back to her shadow form, and grabbed her by her shoulders to shake her into consciousness.

Did they kill her? No. They had done this to the others and they didn't kill them. Right?

Her heart leapt into her throat when Sae slowly opened her eyes. It wasn't really *her,* but there was something about the way Sae looked at her that made her realize they had succeeded. The entire time in her palace, Sae never once regarded Makoto as her sister, or recognized her at all for that matter. The smile that spread over her face brought a new wave of tears to Makoto's eyes.

"Makoto. You're here."

She wrapped her arms around her sister's shoulders and *cried.* Sae was okay. They had defeated her. She was okay! That pressure she had felt for months, more intense in the past few days, was lifted off her shoulders. Her sister was back. She was okay! She knew who she was!

"I'm right here, Sis!"

She felt Sae's hand on the back of her head and cried even harder. "I've put you through so much."

Makoto forced herself to shake her head and pull away from her. One of her arms supported Sae's back, since she was really tired and weakened from the fight. "I-It's okay, Sis. You're back now, and that's all that matters to me."

"I'm proud of you, Makoto." Sae fell against her like she had lost the rest of her strength. She panicked for a minute, but the others came to stand around her.

"We did it," she thought she heard Akechi say. "That was a brilliant strategy, Queen. I should have expected no less from Sae-san's

little sister."

Had he said that to her an hour later, she would have decked him. Now, it was white noise. All she could do was focus on her sister, to keep her safe even as she rested. It was only a matter of time before she would disappear like all the others…

…Wait…

"Well, we should prolly head on out before this place collapses."

It was Ryuji. He had the treasure in his hand. As of now, Akechi had been none the wiser. Makoto carefully lowered Sae's unconscious body to the ground, then slowly came to her feet. Morgana stood at her side, his big blue eyes watching her the entire time.

"Are you alright?"

She paused to take a second to refocus her mind. The entire time in Sae's palace, she had solely been focused on her sister. The first step was complete. Now, she had to prepare for the next while appearing to Akechi as the character he expected her to be.

"I'm fine, but we should head out. I-I want to check on Sae in the real world." Her eyes met with Ryuji's, and without even a nod, she knew he had the decoy. Yusuke stood next to him, and whatever he planned on saying was cut off by the screech of Futaba.

"Y-You guys!! W-We have a problem!!"

"Wh-What's wrong?" Morgana trotted to where Futaba was excelling in her panic mode, whipping out a display of the palace blueprint with flashing lights.

"This is really bad! We have company! A lot of them! We can't possibly take them out!"

Akechi, trying to act *his* part, came up to her to examine the map. "This isn't good. We need to get out of here immediately, or they will tear this place apart."

It was time to begin the second phase. As of right now, Akechi didn't

think anything was off. To their surprise even, he was the first one to head out of the room and out of sight once they told him they were right behind him. Morgana, Ann, and Yusuke followed him out to make sure he actually *left* and didn't linger. From there, Fuuka would be able to track his movements. Just like they had planned.

Ryuji handed her the empty briefcase, then gave Ren a pat on his shoulder before he took off. Futaba closed out of her map, took a deep breath, then barreled into Ren to the point he almost fell over. "You can't leave Mom alone with all of us! It wouldn't be fair to her! Or Papa Sojiro!"

The sight was almost too much for her, but then Haru smiled sadly at her and placed a soft hand on her forearm. The act was enough, which Haru knew, and she walked up to the younger girl and Futaba reluctantly left the room with Haru.

Which left her alone with Ren with hordes of officers on the hunt for him. "I'm sure *Mom* can take care of the kids for a few days, right?"

If he was close enough, she would have slapped him. But he smiled at her, cocky and arrogant like he usually would as Joker, as he took a few tentative steps towards her. Even if she was upset that he could toss out a joke in the heat of the moment, she closed the distance between them and fell into his arms.

"Please trust me, Makoto," he whispered into her hair. "You trusted me in this battle. Trust me in the next one. I won't let you down. Not when I'm dying to have you cook for me."

At that, she gave up fighting him and laughed. It made her feel somewhat better. "I'll make sure I study every recipe out there to make it the best you've ever had."

The kiss that followed was short, sweet, but exactly what she needed. He turned from her with one last look, then he was gone before she could blink. She took a moment to herself to catch her breath, promise herself everything would be okay, then she found her sister's shadow one last time.

"Please, Sis… Please keep him safe."

Chapter 159

Chapter 159

Sae knew something was wrong when she walked into work that morning.

There was hardly anyone around. A few people were chatting quietly about “the big day”. At first, she thought they were referring to the search warrants that could be utilized the next day, until she heard something that made her stop in her place.

“We just have to follow Akechi-kun’s command. We’ll get our terrorist then!”

Akechi had no right to run a task force. Just because she had lost the respect of her boss didn’t mean he could assign *Akechi* a group to lead. And a terrorist? Were they talking about the Phantom Thieves? Akechi did just tell her recently that she was going to owe him an expensive night out, which likely meant he caught a big fish. However, she assumed that he would show up with someone in handcuffs, hand them over to her, and add in some whimsical comment that would irritate her. What the hell was he planning that she couldn’t be a part of herself, or hell, even *know* about?

It should have annoyed her, but she had much bigger concerns on her plate. First and foremost, the calling card she had been given. Someone hand delivered it while she had been out of town. It was hard to imagine that as a coincidence, and her schedule was always different depending on the day. Who would have taken the risk of being caught unless they knew her every move?

It had to have come from the Phantom Thieves, or so she thought. It could have been a prank. Anyone with a few yen bills could buy them in bulk and make them look real. It wasn’t until she stormed over to have a nice chat with Akihiko that it became *real.* She *was* a target. The Phantom Thieves were coming after her. Akihiko didn’t even *care.*

Did he? Had he asked them to change her heart because of all the hell she had given him? Because he couldn't convince her to forgive him himself? It seemed shallow, even for him, unless it came as a surprise to him, too. He sure as hell didn't seem surprised, given the hour and her rage. She left the apartment more dazed and confused than she had when she first got the card.

Was Akechi trying to stop the Phantom Thieves from killing her, or stop them from changing her heart to keep her on the path she had been straying from? There was no reason to go behind her back if he was selfishly doing this for her sake. He could have easily handed over their names and it would have solved all her problems. Did he not think she would believe him? How did he know they were going to target her? Did *he* plant the card for her to find? And why was he working *with* the Phantom Thieves if he was going to betray them?

Maybe he was. After all, if Akihiko stood behind the Phantom Thieves and accused Akechi of being the hitman, then it was clear who the bad guy was. However, it didn't make the Phantom Thieves less *guilty* , and she was still determined to bring them in and solidify her biggest victory to date.

She was being pulled in two different directions with greater force over the past few weeks. One day, she would hate Akihiko to the point she trusted her coworkers, her superiors, Akechi even. The next day, she questioned everyone, but heard that tiny part of her subconscious tell her that she knew who was being truthful.

"I need you to trust me, Sae."

Sae shook her head to drown out Akihiko's voice. Then, she stopped to think about the bigger picture. If her recent findings were really true, Akechi was Shido's son. He harassed the same woman Amamiya had likely saved over a year ago. All for what? To avoid a kidnapping or sexual harassment charge? To keep his reputation clean in the eyes of his loyal constituents? Why else would he feel so compelled to ruin a young man's life who had done nothing more than help a frightened woman?

Assuming it was the same case, Sae found it ironic that Amamiya

was now in the same city Shido was trying to take over. She was sure if the two of them bumped into each other during his campaigning, it would spark a disaster.

She also had to remember that Shido was the same person who threatened Akihiko to the point of silence. He wasn't a man to mess around with. He had never stepped foot in her office outside the time he offered her a promotion, which she was starting to see was only a ruse to get Akihiko to freak out.

Akechi working with Shido was also terrifying to think about. Why? Akechi always talked with so much spite towards his father. Why would he willingly work as one of his hitmen in this "other world"? What was Akechi's motive? Was it something Akihiko had been figuring out, and they had to try and stop him?

…Why was it that the more she thought about it, the more everything started to make sense?

Akihiko had ruined Kaneshiro when they first moved to Tokyo, earning him a target on his back. Why it took them so long to go after him, she would never know, unless they had and failed spectacularly. Either way, one attempt failed, followed by another that was handed to them on a silver plate (aka her *sister*), then after the botched mental shutdown attempt, Shido likely had enough and went after Akihiko himself. Akechi likely found out about their relationship because her mother had told him what happened after the failed mental shutdown. Once that little tidbit was out in the open, it was only a matter of time before they tried using her and her sister to sway him.

He cares about you. You just don't want to believe it.

Akihiko always cared more about Makoto. That much would never change.

Your sister was too young, and you never wanted his help anyway. He worried about her safety just as he worried over yours.

She almost beat her head on her desk to get the thoughts to stop. It would make her headache even more potent, but it would keep her

mind off the past and the regrets she kept locked deep in her heart.

He could have stopped the Phantom Thieves, or given her their names. Sadly for her, that was all Akihiko had against her. He had been relatively forthcoming about everything else. Which was why she felt torn between trusting him and fearing for her own safety. He hadn't been there for her all those times in the past when it was her against another murderous shadow figure. Why would he be there for her now?

Her head was pounding to the point she needed some fresh air. Sae gathered her paperwork, still being denied access to her computer, and put everything in her bag. With the events of the last few days, she had little time to look into Mitsuru's files she had given to her. She had yet to look into this confidant that had tipped her off about Akechi's mother's friend. She had yet to validate anything the friend had even told her. Some coffee and a phone call to Mitsuru would fix that.

Her plans hit a brick wall when she was about to walk out of the courthouse.

Akechi walked right in like he owned the place. After overhearing the little comment about him and his little "plot", all she really wanted to do was slap him across the face and remind him of his place. To her surprise, he saw her and smiled, heading in her direction. His expression unnerved her, and he held up a hand before she could even ask what he was doing after weeks of hiding from her.

"Be careful around Akechi."

"We've captured him."

It had been a hell of a day, so she was a little slow in understanding what he had been trying to tell her. "You have who?"

"The leader of the Phantom Thieves has been arrested."

Sae was so flabbergasted that she dropped her bag. The noise snapped her out of it, thankfully, and she was quick to gather her things again before Akechi was able to take a peek at anything he

shouldn't have. "You're serious?"

Akechi nodded, his smile stretching further across his face. Something was *wrong.* "The police are interrogating him now, but, I figured you'd like to know."

Now she was angry.

This was *her case* to work on, so why was she finding out from Akechi that someone else was interrogating her suspect? And why had Akechi not told her yet about his little stunt? She shook her head. It didn't matter. If her suspect chose not to say anything, she could execute the search warrants and find more evidence to get him to talk. Depending on who her suspect was, she could use her warrants as leverage to get them to talk. Best of all, she could use anything her suspect said, or didn't say, against Akihiko.

She never walked so fast to the police station in her life. There was no telling how the interrogation was going with the police. The last big-name target that had been arrested had been Akihiko, and she didn't want to think about how terribly that had gone. Not that she wouldn't condone any aggression, but there was a limit. And she wanted to be there to hear anything they were to say. She should have been there first anyway.

The police station was in a buzz when she walked through the lobby. There were comments about the Phantom Thieves, that they had one, and they would get the others. There were some officers that sat at their desk, confused, probably thinking to themselves about how it had been their job to bring this group in, and *Akechi effortlessly* did it for them. A few officers had the nerve to call out to her, tell her she was making a huge mistake, but she ignored them and kept heading to the staircase.

Sae felt a swell of pride when she found Akihiko off to the side, speaking to another officer. He looked at her for not even a second before he looked away, defeated. She grabbed her bag at her shoulders, smiled like she had won national recognition, and used that energy to head down to the interrogation room her suspect was being held at.

And of course, the police commissioner would try and keep her out. “You have no right to be here, Niijima.”

She rolled her eyes. “This is *my* case. It has been my case since the task force was created.”

“You’re too soft for this terrorist. Leave him to us.”

Normally, she had to put up with some resistance, but they always gave in. He was a fool if he thought she was going to walk away now. “I’m speaking to him whether you want me to or not.”

He chuckled at her, something that made her vision turn red for a moment. “You’re not going to talk to him. As soon as he’s conscious again, we will get our answers, and *we* will get the recognition for *our* hard work. You can just go back to preparing court documentation, *Sanada-san.”*

She snapped, grabbed his arm, and yanked him to face her when he turned away. “I will march right back up those stairs and tell *Sanada* that you are standing in my way. I’m sure he would love to come down here, where there is no one but you and me, and get his due justice for what you did to him. So either you let me speak to *my* suspect right now, or you can find out just how strong his left hook is and how blind I can be.”

There was a bitter taste on her tongue after her threat. Usually, she was furious when someone called her out as a *Sanada* , but she was irritated with the commissioner. His reaction was priceless, so it all worked itself out. He narrowed his eyes after recovering from his shock, then stepped aside while she smiled widely at him.

“You better watch your back, Niijima.” He growled at her, but she acted like she never heard him. “Your father will soon be a dead man.”

She was feeling good at the moment, so she turned back to him once she was standing in front of the door where her suspect was waiting. “How many times have you tried to kill him and failed? I stopped counting after two.”

Why she decided to say anything at all, she hadn't a clue, but it was worth it. Watching the commissioner's face darken in rage was one of the most entertaining sights she had witnessed in weeks. It felt good to stand up to him and not let his previous threats pull her down. It felt good to put him in his place. It felt good to be back on top again.

That high lifted her up to a peak, but as soon as she was in the interrogation room, she fell flat on her face.

She recognized the uniform, the dark and shaggy hair…

No…

It was as if the room had collapsed on her. If she had the strength and the mental ability, she would have walked right out of the room and turned in her notice to leave her job. This couldn't be real. This was the same boy that she trusted to keep her sister safe. And he did, for the most part. How was she going to tell her sister, the only person she really loved anymore, that someone important to her was a *criminal?*

Unless...maybe Makoto already knew...

Even his criminal status had likely been a hoax. Was this just another failure of the justice system? Why did she suddenly not want a hand in it? Why was *winning* not her motivator anymore?

Finally, she summoned up the courage to step forward, dropped her bag on the table, and sat down across from him. His hands were cuffed to the table, his head lowered to his chest, but she could still see the signs of a beat down. In her disgust, she looked away to gather her thoughts, and found several vials on the floor, the same type of needle that was used to get Akihiko to talk weeks ago. To use *so many* on a *child…*

"Are you okay?"

In her four years as a prosecutor, Sae never once thought about the criminal's well-being. This was different. Not only was he her sister's friend, boyfriend maybe, it didn't give anyone the right to beat him

into unconsciousness. Especially since he couldn't fight back. Plus, her sister would never associate with someone whose intent was to kill. Akihiko would never stand up for him if he knew the boy was a killer, or even a petty thief.

Something was very wrong here. She could feel it in the way her stomach turned.

"Amamiya?"

He groaned, possibly from the pain, possibly from being forced awake. However, Sae knew that she didn't have a lot of time before the commissioner either barged in, called her out on her bluff (or Akihiko really came down and beat the shit out of someone), or did something drastic. She didn't want to push him in his condition, but she needed him to talk.

"I know you're likely in pain, but as of right now, I'm your last hope. I need you to tell me what the hell you've been doing, or you'll never see the light of day again."

He started to come to, sitting back on his chair, wincing at the weak light over their head. He tried pulling on his hands, realized he couldn't, then finally made eye contact with her.

That seemed to clear him out of his fog. "N-Niijima-san?"

It wasn't going to be easy, but she needed him focused. While he continued to regain his composure, she pulled out her file she had been working on for months. "I need you to tell me your story. This will be the last chance you get. Don't blow it."

At first, she was worried he was going to lie to her, or worse yet, tell her he really was a murderer and he had been using her sister to make himself look innocent. She didn't get that impression of him when she had her brief talk with him, so she doubted that much. She breathed a sigh of relief when he lowered his head again, eyes on his hands, defeated.

To help him along, she passed him a picture of their first supposed target. "Suguru Kamoshida. You remember him, yes?"

Amamiya nodded. “I found his palace by accident.”

Palace? “Are you trying to be cute right now?”

He shook his head, then waited a second for the supposed pain to fade. “It’s the term used to describe someone’s out of control desires that have become a physical form in the Metaverse. I had this app open on my phone, to try and delete it, and the three keywords were picked up, so when I went to school my first day, I walked straight into his palace.”

Sae stared back at him, dumbstruck. “Wh-What?”

He continued on like she was following along perfectly. “He ruled the castle, the school, and he thought he could do whatever he wanted. Had I not awoken to my powers, I wouldn’t have been able to do anything. But since I did, I felt like I could help save all those students he was getting away with hurting.”

Two things hit her: one, he spoke about a *power.* Akihiko had told her he had some bizarre power, too. She didn’t know what the Metaverse was, but if she had to guess, it was the “other world” he had mentioned to her before. Was this why Akihiko told her to trust him, why he took in Amamiya in the first place? Was Akihiko really one of them? If not, how did he know so much about everything?

Two, bringing up Kamoshida made her skin crawl. Back then, Sae was happy to know someone had finally done something to remove Kamoshida from the school. But if Akihiko had this power, knew about this other world, why didn’t he do something about it when he had failed by conventional means?

She shook her head. “What is this power you speak of?”

Amamiya winced, but before she could ask him if he was okay, he relaxed and started to talk. “I was scared I was going to watch someone die. I can’t really describe it, but I heard a voice, asking me if I regretted what happened back home, then I’m, I guess, ripping off my mask and becoming who I *really* am inside. As soon as I accepted that, there’s a spirit fighting with me, called a persona. That’s how I was able to fight shadows and the palace leaders

themselves."

He confirmed her earlier thought. This was the same power Akihiko had. Which meant this was the same world Mitsuru and her family had studied. The same world that Isshiki had been aware of. The same place someone was murdering people to create mental shutdowns…

She couldn't contain her question again. "Did you work with Sanada?"

When Amamiya shook his head, her fist slammed the table. She didn't want to trust him, because nothing he had said made sense, and she was sure Akihiko was one of them now more than ever. How could he not be if they both had the same power? How many people had this power? Was it common? She didn't think she had it…

She tried a different approach. "How did you defeat Kamoshida and make him confess?"

It was a two-fold question. She would learn about how the Phantom Thieves did their "change of heart", while being able to see the change in his story when she brought up Okumura. Depending on his answer then, he could very well make her believe he was responsible for the mental shutdowns as well.

Akechi is behind the mental shutdowns…

Amamiya grabbed her attention again. "We had to find the treasure, which is the source of the leader's twisted desires. After that, we issued calling cards. Their purpose was to alert the palace leader that they weren't as safe as their pride thought they were. That would trigger their treasure to take form. The next day, we go back and defeat them, take the treasure, and return to the real world."

It was hard for her to believe everything he was saying. However, if she trusted him, it would explain why the calling cards were used at all. It made some sense. She just never thought there would be a different world, weird powers, and now *treasure* involved.

“Kamoshida’s treasure was his Olympic medal. It made him believe he was powerful, that he could do what he wanted because he had one. The school helped him to feed that desire to be the best. Everyone wanted to learn from him, but no one was good enough in his eyes. The abuse continued because no one would do anything to stop him.”

She crossed her arms as she fell back in her seat. “Ryuji Sakamoto suffered a broken leg after Kamoshida joined the staff. Shiho Suzui jumped off your school’s rooftop. Yuuki Mishima, Sakamoto, and yourself were to be expelled from the school at the request of Kamoshida himself. How many of them worked with you to get your revenge?”

To her surprise, Amamiya narrowed his eyes at her. “He also pushed your sister up against a wall, choked her badly enough to leave a bruise around her neck, and he would have sexually assaulted her had my *cat* not saved her.”

She was on her feet in a fury. “How *dare* you think you can use Makoto against me right now! Don’t you *ever* bring her into this-,”

“She was one of the reasons why I had to take down Kamoshida.” He had some nerve to interrupt her, but his tone was much softer, almost like he had withdrawn into himself. “Ryuji told me that Sanada was the only person who even tried to help that school. I was terrified of the power once I wielded it, but it was the only way I could *help.”*

Sae lowered herself back to her chair. “The justice system would have run its course in time.”

“What would you have done?”

She leaned back in surprise. “What?”

His eyes darkened again. “If you knew you could stop a man from hurting the people you cared about, your sister, would you? Or would you keep *waiting* for a system that failed you once in the past to *run its course?”*

Sae wanted to slap him across the face for his comment. However, she couldn't really blame him for his disdain. What *would* she have done, knowing her sister was only one of many students being assaulted by one man? Akihiko was well respected back then, and even he could do nothing. Where would any of those children be had Amamiya not done anything?

It made her sick to think about, so she changed the subject. "So you successfully changed Kamoshida's heart without being caught. Why did you target your next victim?" She passed a picture of Ichiryusai Madarame across the table. "You had to have gone out of your way for him, as he had no association with Shujin."

The more she listened to him talk about what took place with Madarame, the more she felt herself *believe* him. He spoke with certainty, detailing events well enough to answer her questions before she even asked them. He was definitely a member of the Phantom Thieves, possibly their actual leader, but there was still one question she couldn't ask him just yet.

She felt a stab to her heart when he spoke about Kaneshiro. Whether or not he knew it, the doubt she always pushed out of her mind about Makoto being a member was no longer a question. It was a *fact* . It hit her so hard that while she heard Amamiya's voice, she didn't make out any words.

Her little sister was a Phantom Thief. Everything now made perfect sense. Makoto's backbone that day she confronted her about her stupid decision to chase after a criminal. Akihiko constantly defending them and keeping her from speaking to Makoto at all. The fact Akihiko could hold his ground when she was doing everything she could think of to tear him down…

He was protecting her sister. *That* had been why he wanted her to trust him.

She had been stupid to keep ignoring the facts that were in front of her face. She could have ended this madness months ago if she could have arrested her sister and locked her up for a few days until she broke down and confessed. She would have succeeded in her biggest case of the year, brought hope to a terrified country, proven

her worth as a *Niijima…*

She's your sister…

Maybe her mother was right. She really was that monster roaming the streets, looking for her next prey, anything to get ahead of the pack. Akihiko was right to pull Amamiya off the streets so she couldn't get her hands on him first and corner him into confessing. She had been so blinded by her own desire to *win* that she would have gone after the only person that kept her going…

Was that why they targeted her? Was she really no different than Kamoshida, or Kaneshiro?

It was a punch to the gut she never saw coming. She physically felt ill. Her nails were biting into the palm of her hands. There was a burn in the back of her eyes.

You're no different than a man that assaulted your sister and a man who blackmailed her.

"…Niijima-san?"

Sae quickly sat up straight, forgetting where she was and who she was with. Amamiya stared back at her with concern, maybe, or he had asked a question that she didn't even hear. She was still so numb, disgusted with herself, and she couldn't even think straight to gather more information.

Her pride suffered a critical hit, but she knew Akihiko had been right all along. He protected her sister from *her* , and he had every right to do so. She didn't know how she could live with herself if her little sister had to suffer this level of brutality because she wanted a victory.

"Who killed Okumura?"

It wasn't the direction she initially wanted to take without more information, but she was losing ground fast. The details didn't matter to her right now. She needed answers so she could refocus her investigation. She knew he was being framed, especially given his withdrawal at the mention of Okumura, but she needed him to name

someone. Throwing her full trust into Akihiko's story right now would backfire in her face.

"Do you trust me?"

The numbness was making her tired. "My sister…" She paused and held her hand to her head. "Did she work with you?"

His answer wasn't direct, but it sealed the deal. "You should know the answer to that."

She may have known before she asked, but knowing it was *true* was all it took. "You've told one hell of a story, Amamiya, even if it makes little sense. However, you saved my sister. Twice." She took a deep breath, then released it slowly. "I will trust you for now. But I need to know who was behind Okumura's death if it wasn't you."

There came a loud knock on the door. "Your time is up, Niijima! You have five minutes before we force you out!"

Typical. Right when she was going to hopefully get to the bottom of this…

"Please, Niijima-san. I-I need your help."

Amamiya's desperation took her by surprise. He looked like he was still in great pain, but his breathing was erratic and he was shaking slightly. He could have been suffering from an injury, or a reaction from the injections. She thought it best not to waste any more time. "What's wrong, Amamiya?"

"The culprit you're looking for," he started, his voice half as strong as it had been during their conversation. He was scared, or the drugs were kicking back in. Or he knew once she was gone, he was done for. "He's going to kill me. Here. The second you walk away."

She wanted to laugh, but the entire time she had spoken to him, even previously, he was *never* afraid. He didn't come across as a liar, and that was saying something after the ridiculous story he had told her. If he was serious, then this was her chance to *do* something instead of *waiting* for the corrupt system she knew so well to find him innocent.

Plus, whether she wanted to admit it or not, Amamiya did so much to keep her sister safe. Akihiko kept Makoto safe. For once, she would side with them. She could make her judgments about both men after everything was said and done.

“Please tell me you have the phone.”

A phone? She had hers all the time, since crime and paperwork could never *stop.* So why would he ask her a stupid question? “I always have my…”

He was referring to the phone Mitsuru had given her. She found it odd at the time, but Mitsuru had told her to contact her with anything she wanted hidden from her boss, or other prying, annoying eyes. Did Amamiya want to get in touch with her now? How would he know she knew Mitsuru? Makoto, perhaps? He sure took one hell of a risk by assuming she would have it with her.

…Was all of this… *planned?*

Sae shook the thought from her mind, pulled it out of her bag, and showed it to him. “You want to speak to Mitsuru?”

When he exhaled deeply, it gave her pause. What was happening? “N-No. But if you see Akechi, w-will you ask him if he’s seen it before?”

She was going to ask him why Akechi would recognize a phone that belonged to someone he had only dealt with in passing, but then his words sank in.

Someone was going to kill him. That same person was the one who killed Okumura. The same person who caused mental shutdowns.

“Until you know about this other world, Sae, you can’t prove a damn thing. And when you finally do learn about it, you’ll realize you were wrong the entire time.”

Akechi was the one causing the mental shutdowns. He tried to kill Akihiko because he *knew.* Now he was going to kill Amamiya

because *he* knew. She may not have heard the entire story from Amamiya, but that could wait. Because Akihiko had been right that day, reminding her that her true objective hadn't been finding the identity of the Phantom Thieves, but finding the criminal responsible for the mental shutdowns.

Okumura's death had been a beautiful distraction.

"Amamiya."

She pushed herself up to her feet and his eyes followed her. She suddenly saw a child, trapped with no way out, broken and beaten and terrified. How many other innocent people had been wronged like this, that she *let* face punishment they didn't deserve?

She could deal with that later. "Trust me. I may not know what's happening, but he won't kill you. I won't let him."

Sae turned from him then before the boy's tears made her burn the entire building to the ground.

Chapter 160

Chapter 160

Sae was grateful that she had a minute to breathe when she stepped out of the interrogation room. The police commissioner had been easy enough to shoo away, telling him that she couldn't get a confession from Amamiya, and maybe more time in solitude would change his mind. However, as soon as he was gone, the hallway was eerily quiet. Too quiet. She could even hear her own heartbeat echoing off the walls.

As an outlet for her anxiety, she gripped the phone in her hand. She had never used it since Mitsuru had given it to her, but with the way things had been going for her lately, she always carried it with her. She thought she was paranoid at first, but now, it was hopefully going to save someone's life.

She may never respect Amamiya's, or her sister's, or the other Phantom Thieves' decision to take the law into their own hands time and time again, but there were clearly worse criminals to hunt down. Kamoshida would have taken over that entire school had they not changed his heart. Madarame would have continued to make money off wayward children who saw him as a father. Kaneshiro would never have been arrested, and his crimes would know no bounds.

Sae still wanted to know what had happened with her, why she wasn't breaking down and openly confessing about all the people she threw in prison just because. She could ask Makoto later. When she (hopefully) saved Amamiya.

With a phone.

What if it didn't work? What if Akechi didn't recognize it, or was he *not* supposed to? What if he continued on and walked into that room and killed him while she waited for something to happen? What was she waiting *for?*

"Sae-san?"

Shit…

She struggled to pull herself together. If she didn't act like her usual self, Akechi would know she was up to something. "Ah, Akechi-kun. What are you doing here?"

He smiled, like he was satisfied and about to win a battle, or easily get away with murder. "I ran into the police commissioner while asking for more information on our suspect. I thought that as a fellow teenager, and an acquaintance, I could try and convince him to confess."

Amamiya and Akechi were close in age, but they went to two different schools. Akechi had been working this case with her, but… had he known Amamiya this entire time? Had he known he was the leader months ago?

If he killed Okumura, he had to have *known.*

But why didn't he tell *her?* Did Akechi not think she would believe him? Sae was actually relieved he hadn't told her whenever he had known, since she would have been more than happy to hang Amamiya months ago rather than a week ago...

That sick feeling made her lightheaded, but she shook it off. "While you're here, I found this earlier today. Is it by chance yours?"

When she lifted the phone, she expected some mysterious power to do *something.* Maybe suck him into the phone, or one of these persona things would come out and steal his soul? However, all Akechi did was grab his head for a second, blink, then shook it off.

"I-It...it is not."

She questioned him to buy this "power" more time to do its thing, in case it needed minutes to materialize or…something. "Are you okay?"

The smile returned to his face. Her heart sank into her stomach. "I'm fine. My apologies. I just became dizzy for a second."

She had to keep him away from that room… "Maybe you should sit

down."

He chuckled at her. "Please, Sae-san, I'm okay. But I do hope you make good on your promise to treat me to some sushi following his confession. I am pretty hungry."

When he started to walk down the hall, she panicked. She didn't have time to ask Amamiya why the phone was so important; she just assumed it would do something. She would never be able to face Makoto again if she let Akechi waltz into that room and kill Amamiya while he was still cuffed to the damn table. No one would know the truth, since she was sure Akechi would be able to convince the police and the public it was suicide, or an accident.

But before she could chase after him and tackle him or beat the hell out of him, something wrapped around her stomach and a hand clamped over her mouth. She was pulled around a corner out of sight. Her first reaction was to elbow whoever held her in the gut, but she recognized the voice as soon as she heard it.

"It's okay. You did what you needed to. It's going to be okay."

It was Akihiko.

"We need to be ready to move. Who knows how long he's going to take."

That voice she didn't recognize, but the shadow by her feet had her screaming into Akihiko's hand. It was a weird monster with the head of a cat and it came out of nowhere.

"It's okay, Sae." She struggled to catch her breath, find her bearings, understand what the *fuck* was going on…

The monster at her feet moved to peek around the corner. "I haven't heard anything, but at least we know the trick worked!"

"Are we really going to let him kill him?"

Another voice. Female. Now she was about to pass out. What in gods name was happening?

“Akechi thinks he’s in the real world still,” the monster explained. “Thanks to Niijima having that desire to interrogate the leader of the Phantom Thieves, there will be a version of Ren in the room. Akechi won’t know the difference.”

At this point, Sae moved around enough that Akihiko let her go. “What the hell is going on here?” The monster thing moved, and on reflex, she jumped back. “A-And what the hell is *that?!”*

The monster…pouted? Akihiko lifted a finger to his mouth, telling her to keep her voice down, but it was the other person they were with that came to stand next to her.

“You’ve gotten really big since the last time I saw you, Sae.”

The woman she didn’t recognize, but she clearly knew who she was. “We can explain everything when we get out of this mess,” Akihiko whispered. “For now, follow our lead.”

A quiet laugh came from beside her. “He’s a cat.”

Sae looked over at her, then down to the creature that jumped up and down, clearly offended. “I am *not* a cat!”

One *pop* got the cat…thing to quiet down and focus. It returned to the corner of the hallway to stand guard. She, however, started to panic again. Akihiko was far too composed after hearing what was likely a gunshot.

“How can you just stand there?!”

He held up a hand, which angered her, but the woman next to her grabbed her wrist. “This entire thing was planned. It might not mean much, and I can’t explain it well at all, but you can trust us. We know what we’re doing.”

A second later, there was another shot. She started to get sick. There were people to help, but no one wanted to move. Screw whatever plan this was. Makoto was going to *kill* her if she didn’t do anything now…

Akihiko was just a little too good at reading people and stopped her

before she could even push herself off the wall. “We’re in the Metaverse, Sae. Akechi is likely killing something that isn’t even real, but he’s going to think it is. As soon as he comes out of the room, we will go back to the real world and make sure Amamiya is okay. He’s not really here.”

“Makoto is going to kill me!”

The way he smiled at her, as hard as it was to admit, calmed her down tremendously. “I know this is a lot to take in, but I promise he’s fine. Makoto is fine. As soon as we get him out of here, we can explain everything to you, okay?”

She only nodded her head because she didn’t know what else to do. She was shaking like she was a child and afraid that the monsters under her bed were going to eat her for dinner. She had lost that solid foundation she had been standing on for half of her life. There was nothing to grasp that made *sense.* At the same time, all she could do was take one breath at a time and hold onto the only thing that she knew was *real.*

Akihiko didn’t seem to mind that she held onto his arm like a lifeline. She blamed her behavior on her state of shock.

“He’s coming out.”

She was pulled further down the empty hallway into the shadows. It was suddenly cold, dreary, and damp. There was no way this was the police station. It felt like she was somewhere completely different.

A different world…

It wasn’t at all what she pictured in her head when Akihiko and Amamiya had spoken about it. It looked a lot like the police station, just… *lifeless.* Was this really all it was? How did this world come to exist anyway? And how did Akechi come to find out about it?

…He had known about Isshiki, who had known about this world.

She really was an idiot.

“He passed us. We can get out now.”

Who was the not-cat thing speaking to? And get out? How did they *get in?* Why was no one explaining anything to her?

Nothing really changed a minute later, but there was a sense of urgency in the three others around her. Well, two. The not-cat monster was missing. …Where did it go? Did it not get back out? Were they now in some other demented world?

“Let’s go. There’s no telling how much time we have to get him out of here.”

Akihiko took off around the corner, which snapped her out of her thoughts. The other girl followed after him, so she figured she would do the same. Surely someone would have an answer for her if she stuck around long enough. That and she didn’t want to be alone right now, not knowing which world was which and who was a good guy and where the monster animal was…

Something changed in her when she walked into the interrogation room she had just been inside, watching Akihiko and the other woman trying to talk to an unconscious Amamiya. The good news was that there was no blood, so if Akechi really did shoot at him, he missed. The bad news was, he was unconscious, so he could have been dead…

“Wake up, Ren!”

A big ball of black jumped up on the table and scared the hell out of her. It was a cat, but she could have sworn it *spoke.* Unless there was a third person in the room she couldn’t see.

However, she heard a groan and a few sighs of relief and it suddenly didn’t matter. Amamiya was okay. She didn’t know how, or what really happened, but she could ask later. Akihiko made quick work of the handcuffs, then pushed his chair back to try and shake him awake.

“Be careful, you idiot.” The woman’s sharp tone would have made her laugh any other day. She must have been an old family friend if

she could talk to Akihiko like that without a glare or a retort.

“We have to go.” Akihiko stood up and turned to her. “I have to get back upstairs before people notice I’m gone. Yukari will help you get Amamiya outside. Mitsuru will be waiting for you, and she will be able to answer all your questions. Do not take him to a doctor. Do not speak to anyone. I need you to return to work tomorrow like nothing ever happened. Okay?”

“C’mon guys!” Sae knew for a fact she was dreaming when she saw the cat open its mouth and *speak.*

But as Yukari walked around the table to help Amamiya to his feet, Akihiko walked up to her and wrapped his arms around her, bringing the world to a violent stop. He held onto her tightly, almost *too* tightly, and before she could try and make sense of it, he pulled away.

“I know I don’t tell you this enough, but I’m so proud of you, Sae.” If she could focus hard enough, she could have sworn he was on the verge of crying. She could feel her eyes burn a little, too, even if she wouldn’t admit that. “Please, be careful.”

And he was gone, leaving her frozen in her spot. He had told her a few times in the past that he was proud of her, but she never really *listened.* This time, she heard him loud and clear. It made her realize how much he really did love her, how much she had probably hurt him, all the while, he never gave up on her.

Had he been the one to send the Phantom Thieves after her? But why wasn’t she acting like one of their targets? Had they not been successful? If so, why wasn’t she acting like she normally would have?

“Sae.” She looked up to Yukari, who was now in front of her with Amamiya’s arm around her shoulders. “We need to go.”

She nodded her head to help shake off the numbness settling in again, then turned and led the way. The black cat was at her feet, but it looked up at her and said, “I’ll go on ahead to make sure the path is still clear. Stay together, and I won’t be too far away.”

It was definitely a day that would go down in her history book as the strangest day she ever lived. For now, she knew better than to question anything. When they got out, she could hound Mitsuru all she wanted. The quicker she was able to get Amamiya out of the station and back to his friends and get some help, the quicker she would be able to breathe herself.

Given the excitement over the capture of the Phantom Thieves' leader, Sae expected the police station to be loud and busy. One hallway was empty, then another, the entire *floor* was empty. It made her sick to think about, since it was likely empty to give Akechi ample time to *murder* someone without getting caught. It worked out for their escape, but it was still so hard to fathom.

"There's an emergency exit up ahead. We're getting out there."

Sae turned to Yukari like she had slapped her. "You're joking?" Walking right through an emergency exit would sound the alarms. After all this meticulous planning, why would they do something so brazen to draw attention to themselves?

Yukari smirked, which made her feel stupid. "It's okay. Fuuka is disabling the system for a few seconds. Enough for us to get out undetected and keep the system from noticing a breech."

…Just how far deep did this team run? A talking cat, one police officer, an old family friend, and now a *hacker?* She knew Mitsuru had a lot of great allies, but this was something else.

They both stopped right before their exit, then Yukari nodded to her. Sae understood the signal and opened the door to let her carry Amamiya out into the cold, evening air. The door shut on its own, and for some weird reason, she felt powerful. A successful heist. Doing something *right.* The rush that came with it was exhilarating.

A nice big *fuck you* to everyone that tried to screw her over the last few months.

"Sae!"

Right. They still had to get away from the station. Luckily for her, the

getaway car was right off the street and easy to get to without being noticed. It was a dark car, tinted windows, but nothing special, or something that would stick out in the mass of cars in the area. It would just be like calling a taxi and heading out for dinner if she wasn't in the mood for humans and mother nature.

The driver she also recognized. "You guys did it!"

Yukari waved a hand the second Sae closed the door behind her. "Get going. He needs someone to look at him."

She suddenly felt awkward in the back of the car, a teenager between her and a family friend she didn't know, with a driver she had met once in the past. The questions were mounting in her mind, but she couldn't find her voice to get them out into the open. Every now and then, Amamiya would cough, or say something incoherent, but at least he was alive. That was a step in the right direction.

"I have to admit, I didn't really think this was going to work."

The man in the front laughed like Yukari had told a hilarious joke. "Hey now. This is what we're good at!"

Yukari rolled her eyes, and Sae was desperate to know exactly who these two were. "Who are you guys?"

"Forgot me already?" The man sighed in disappointment. "Guess I shouldn't be surprised."

"We work with Mitsuru," Yukari added, keeping her eyes on the teen resting against her. "We have for years. We usually keep to our parts of the country, but after the hit was taken out on your family months ago, she thought extra eyes would be for the best."

That caught her off guard. "A…A hit?"

"Ken works at Shujin to keep an eye on your sister. I've been working in Kasumigaseki with two other operatives, and keeping your mother entertained and busy showing me the sights. Tokyo is a huge city."

Ken…he was the guy who came into her office and tried to convince

her that she needed to calm down when she wanted to arrest Akihiko in the past. Both of them worked with Mitsuru, which would mean they at least knew Akihiko. Yukari seemed to know her mother…

“You both know my parents?”

Yukari nodded. “I knew you, too. Your mother may never admit it, but she was so scared to have a child. Akihiko had to work all the time. So I got to come babysit a lot. You were by far the most well-behaved toddler I’ve ever met in my life.”

Growing uncomfortable, she tried to change the subject. “Where are we going?”

“Leblanc.” It was the first time she heard Ken speak so seriously. “Sakura-san is aware of the situation. The others are there. Amamiya can get his rest, and you can get your answers. And I can get some coffee!”

Yukari leaned forward and smacked Ken on the shoulder. “Get us there in one piece first.”

Sae was too nervous to ask any other questions in fear they would turn into memories of her long-forgotten childhood. Yukari at least was able to focus her attention on keeping Amamiya conscious, and Ken had to focus on the road. The slight peace, and now safety, gave her time to herself.

She never imagined that finding out the truth would have opened Pandora's box. Akechi really went to the interrogation room to kill Amamiya. Akechi really did try to kill Akihiko. He really killed Okumura. All to keep a secret a secret? What was that secret? Would Akihiko know? And how could Shido sit at the top, oblivious to his own son creating mass terror, then vow to capture the Phantom Thieves?

…Did Shido know Akechi was killing people? Was he doing it for him? Did Akechi even know Shido was his biological father?

“No one should be allowed to use their children as an excuse to do

whatever they want."

He had to know the truth. But thinking about it was giving her a serious migraine, and she hadn't even started getting answers for what was happening *now.* The only thing she did know was that this was all connected somehow. Hopefully after tonight, it would all make sense.

"We're here."

Finally. Not only could she get out and get some fresh air, but she could stretch herself out and maybe take off towards the station to avoid having to face the sinking reality that she had been wrong for years. Would Makoto be inside, or her mother? Would they judge her? Or yell at her and tell her she was a fool for not believing them earlier? How many other Phantom Thieves were inside? Were her findings right about them, just unfounded until this very moment?

She soon realized that she was the closest to the cafe's door, so she reached back into the car to help Amamiya out. When he was out, she had to support him more than she thought she would, and he was much heavier than he looked. She gave him a light shake and was rewarded with another groggy mumble. It was impressive that he had been able to do much of anything, much less hold a conversation with her over an hour ago.

Sakura pushed the door open when Sae began slowly walking up to the shop. His eyes quickly searched the area, and to her surprise, he didn't question why she was there. "Come in."

Yukari and Ken were right behind her. It was getting late now, but it looked like Sojiro had long since closed his shop for the day. There was no trace of customers, or really anyone around the block. It unnerved her, as the hallways of the police station had been much the same, but there was a huge difference once she fully came into the store.

"We did it!"

"Reeeeeen!"

Amamiya stirred in her arms, then a blond boy, Sakamoto, rushed up into her face like a bolt of lightning. “Ren-Ren! You’re alright! Dude, you’re so effin’ awesome!”

“You did well.”

Sae found Mitsuru sitting in one of the booths with her sister and her mother. Any other time, she would have walked right back out the front door to avoid speaking to them. Even if she wanted to run away now, Makoto shot up from her seat and ran over to her.

“I’m so glad you’re okay, Sis.”

She figured Makoto’s main source of concern would have been for Amamiya’s safety, so it was nice to know she hadn’t lost her sister’s respect. Mitsuru followed suit as Sakura helped Sakamoto take Amamiya from her. As soon as he was in someone else’s care, Makoto threw her arms around her and hugged her tightly. She could have sworn she was crying, too.

“Operation Tricky Trickster accomplished!” Ken shouted somewhat quietly as he stood next to Mitsuru. “I really need some coffee now.”

Sae took that chance to look around the room. There were a few children she recognized as potential suspects in her case. Ann Takemaki, Suzui-san’s friend and one of Kamoshida’s victims. Yusuke Kitawaga, Madarame’s star pupil. Haru Okumura, Okumura’s daughter. Isshiki’s daughter, Futaba, was there as well.

And of course, her sister, who finally peeled herself away from her. “W-We heard on the news that…that Ren was dead…and we all… we all panicked.”

Dead? How the hell had word gotten out that fast? And why the hell did anyone believe Akechi’s word alone? What *were* Akechi’s words?

“Suicide,” Mitsuru answered for her. “The leader of the Phantom Thieves, the true culprit behind the mental shutdowns and mass chaos in the city, shot himself in his confinement. It’s been the talk of the stations ever since.”

Sae suddenly felt dizzy again, something Mitsuru picked up on, and guided her to take a seat at the closest booth. “I-I don’t…I don’t understand.”

Her mother reached across the table and grabbed her hand. “Everything worked out just as we all knew it would. You’re safe. Ren’s safe. We’re going to catch the real bad guys now.”

It was the first time in days, if not weeks, that she met her mother’s eyes. There was no hostility, or dormant anger lingering in them. It was as if they had gone back in time, when the two of them would sit at the coffee shop and talk about her sister, her career, how bored her mother was with nothing to do around the house…

Ironic. Here she was, back in a coffee shop, sitting across from her mother, about to have the talk of her life.

While the teenagers hovered around Amamiya, Mitsuru took the seat next to her mother. “I’m assuming you have questions you’d like answered.”

One of her hands lifted to her head. “I don’t even know where to start.”

“Then allow me.” Mitsuru leaned back, folded her arms over her chest, and released a deep breath. “I know Akihiko has told you about my family. The world you were taken into is what we call the Metaverse. It’s a cognitive world that takes shape based on the person, or the environment, it feeds off of. It’s a world that sadly, we still don’t understand beyond what these children do.”

“H-How did you plan all of this?” It wasn’t really the question she wanted to ask, but it was a general enough one that could get her brain turning again.

“With a lot of luck and a lot of help.”

Sae exhaled dramatically. “Luck is what saved that boy?”

“You did, Sae.” Mitsuru seemed rather pleased, and it made her somewhat proud. “The only reason this plan was successful was because Akihiko put his trust in you, and you came through for all of

us."

Her heart sank into her stomach. Minako must have caught her reaction as her hand tightened over her own. "You were asking more questions, doubting more people. Your father knew that you were pulling yourself out of that web of lies you were surrounded in. With the extra push from Ren, here we are."

"The entire situation, from after Kaneshiro's arrest until now, had been set up by the enemy." Mitsuru once again held her attention. "We're still filling in the gaps with details, but as of now, we are certain that there's someone orchestrating everything. Medjed was a hoax to draw more attention to the Phantom Thieves. Their electronic fingerprint can be traced back to the police station, to politicians, to Akechi himself. Okumura was forced to the top of the poll that the teenagers based their targets off of by the same group responsible for Medjed. Okumura knew too much and meant too little, and the Phantom Thieves were becoming a nuisance to their plans. They killed two birds with one stone."

She thought her head was going to explode. "How did Akechi kill someone, but the Phantom Thieves did not?"

"From my understanding, Akechi would *kill* these shadows. The Phantom Thieves only defeated them, which allowed them to see the error of their ways."

"Then how did Amamiya live?" Sae narrowed her eyes. "I heard the gunshots. Akechi wouldn't have just shot at nothing."

When Mitsuru hesitated, she thought that maybe this was the *luck* she had referred to before. "A shadow is technically the dark desires that live in the heart manifested as a physical form. In some regards, a shadow and the heart are linked. The shadow that Akechi took out was not Amamiya's true shadow. All of this was a part of *your* cognition, Sae. Your version of Amamiya is what Akechi killed."

It brought her to the question she had been dreading to ask. "D-Did I…Did I have one of these…shadows?"

Mitsuru spared a glance to Minako, who dropped her eyes to the

table. “Sae, you were so angry. Your father and I tried to reach out to you, but after months of knowing how to help you, we were left with no choice. I asked them to go after you, even knowing the dangers you would face, because I didn’t know what else to do to save you.”

Her words struck her like a mallet. She figured it was Makoto, or Akihiko, who asked the Phantom Thieves to change her heart. The last person she would have guessed would have been her own *mother.* Even if she did have a valid reason, a small part of her felt a stab of betrayal.

“It was for the best, Sae.” Mitsuru also appeared apologetic. “Your palace is what we used to stage this trap. Your strength of heart is what allowed it to be successful. We could not have asked this of any other person and had it all work out like it has.”

Sae fell back against her seat, mentally and emotional exhausted. “Then if they stole my supposed treasure, why am I not being arrested and confessing about all the terrible things I’ve done?”

“Because they didn’t.” She waited for Mitsuru to continue, but the small smile that came to her face made her feel weird. “Your treasure was never stolen. Your palace is likely still intact. You were able to bring about a change of heart on your own.”

Minako’s hand squeezed hers again. “This is why your father put so much faith in you. He knew you could find the truth on your own. And you did, Sae. Because you’re our daughter.”

It was like a giant wave took the beach she was walking on out from under her. Her entire life had been spent hating her father, denying every little thing he did, pushing him away until he finally left her alone. Even after she left the house, after all the times he tried to help her, she did all she could to make him suffer. He was a *fool* for running the risk of having an innocent victim murdered, or even herself, just because he wanted to capture his criminal.

But at the same time, she felt free. She may not know everything, but she knew enough. She also saw firsthand the kind of people that had worked together to save Amamiya, and in turn, save *her* . If she

had asked Mitsuru for help all those months ago, perhaps none of this would have happened.

“Unfortunately, we’re not done.” Mitsuru closed her eyes, her expression blank as if she was thinking to herself. “Akechi will need to be continuously monitored to make sure he doesn’t find out about what really happened. It will take more time to devise a strategy to use this information against him and in turn, find the evidence to arrest all of those he’s involved with. However,” she said as she opened her eyes. “I’d like to believe we can count on you for support now as well.”

She would be an idiot to say no at this point. Mitsuru wasn’t going to deny anything. There was an entire room filled with people who would *help* instead of *hinder* . She could work with her sister, keep her safe, keep her happy. It was a much better alternative than returning to the people who wanted to use her as a bargaining chip and keep her in the dark. Hell, she may even get more respect and power if she worked with Mitsuru.

So, Sae agreed with her. Minako smiled brightly across the table. Mitsuru appeared just as relieved. So long as she didn’t have to work with her *father* , she would be content.

A few minutes later, she heard her phone go off in her bag. Sae excused herself from the light conversation she was in to retrieve it, and froze when she saw a message from Akechi.

Meet me at the station tomorrow. You owe me sushi. :)

“Something wrong?”

She shook her head, put her phone away, and ignored Akechi’s text. “Nothing at all.”

It would be uncharacteristic of her if she denied Akechi that sushi she “owed” him. All she had to do now was pray she wasn’t walking right into his trap.

Chapter 161

Chapter 161

A few hours ago, Makoto had been petrified, anxious in a way she had never been before, and mentally exhausted.

Hearing about the supposed suicide of the leader of the Phantom Thieves made her feel like all their hard work had been for nothing. The headline repeated over and over and over, from broadcasts on TV, the radio, the trains, from people walking around her. She couldn't escape it, and a part of her thought it was a sign that Ren really was *dead.*

She never stopped to cry, and she gave herself a pat on the back. Mitsuru had warned her that this might happen, so the fact it actually *did* meant things probably went as they had planned. Her dad also promised her that he would pull Ren out of the interrogation if he overheard something he didn't like, and she trusted him. It was just difficult walking around, trying to act *normal* when she didn't *know* …

It was the longest and most painful four hours of her life. She was the first one to arrive at Leblanc, an hour before anyone else was to be there, simply because the nearly empty café reminded her so much of Ren. How he liked to cook for her, or at least bring her curry and coffee. How the last time they were together, he failed miserably trying to show off in the kitchen because she was watching him. The image of him hovering over her on his bed, however, made her cover her face with her hands and she was thankful none of her friends were around to see her.

So naturally, when the decisive moment came, Makoto thought she was going to suffocate under the anticipation. She waited, checked the clock, checked her phone, told her mother she was okay, then looked at the door. The motions repeated themselves until finally, *finally* the right car pulled up, if only an hour off her mental schedule. Sojiro walked out of the store, then her sister walked in supporting a barely conscious Ren.

She thought it was a good time to cry over the fear of failure, of death, of the what could have beens. But she also cried because he was alive, her sister was alive, and they had come together successfully.

She nearly tackled her sister to the floor, which Sae clearly wasn't expecting. She was alive. She seemed okay, even if she was probably lost and confused about what had happened. Not only was she okay, she brought Ren back to them. It was a feeling she couldn't put into words, so she just leaned against Sae and cried until she felt her shifting around.

Ren wasn't supposed to tell her individual names in his story, but her sister glanced around the room, putting the rest of the pieces together. Makoto stepped back to give her some breathing room, which was when Mitsuru pulled her over to fine tune what Ren would have told her.

It left her hanging in the middle. She wanted to sit next to Sae, to help her understand why they did what they did and how, but Mitsuru would be able to do that all her own. Her friends were hovering over Ren, trying to assess how badly he was hurt, if he needed anything, how lucky he was to have pulled everything off…

Eventually, her feet moved her towards Ren. She hadn't gotten a good look at him when he was carried in through the door. When she came to stand behind Ann, she turned to her, startled, then beamed brightly.

"I think someone wants to see you."

Haru gave her much the same look, but the moment her eyes landed on Ren, everything else faded into the background. He had red blotches on his face, rings on his neck, and she didn't want to know what other marks covered the rest of him. While a brutal interrogation was bound to happen, as her father had warned her, it still broke her heart.

How could people sworn to uphold the law treat someone so cruelly? Ren hadn't even done anything to deserve this level of treatment. No one ever should. How did anyone find this

methodology acceptable?

She was so drawn into her anger that she jumped slightly when she felt a hand on her arm. When she was focused again, she saw Ren, eyes barely cracked open, smiling like he wasn't in pain or considered dead to the public. "Hi."

His words came out more as a cough, but it was enough to break her heart cleanly into two. She draped her arms around him, trying to be as cautious as she could. She felt him wince immediately at the contact, so she tried to pull away. Even with his injuries, he was quick enough to lift his arms up to keep her relatively close to him.

"Hi."

Makoto felt a few tears fall from her eyes at the sound of his hoarse voice. "I'm so sorry this happened to you."

He shook his head, the fringes of his hair sweeping over her face. She noticed some faint traces of blood in his hair. She had to bite her lip to keep herself from screaming. "I-I'm not."

He would try and be strong right now, and she wasn't about to remind him of all the terrible things he had been through in the past few hours. Instead, she did her best to avoid causing him pain and kissed his forehead, exhaling deeply to help ground herself. If she ever saw Akechi again…

"You missed."

She leaned back enough to try and read his expression, but the smile on his face was all the answer she needed. In response, she smiled back at him, then gave into his unspoken request and kissed his lips.

The cackling and hoots from around her made her realize she wasn't alone and in her own little world like she thought she was.

"Awwww…"

"What a beautiful scene."

“Mom and Dad for the win!”

Ren had the gall to laugh when she pulled away from him, face burning like she was thrown into a volcano.

“Wait…” She watched Ryuji shake his head, as if trying to clear his mind to make room for the biggest revelation in history. “You two are *dating?!”*

It was a terrible time to have the discussion, but it was also interesting how Ryuji, or anyone for that matter, didn’t *know* at this point. Ann thought along the same lines as she rolled her eyes and shot a hand to her hip.

“You are an idiot, Ryuji.”

“We should let them get some rest.” Haru winked at her, and now there was an implication she refused to acknowledge. “It’s been an arduous day. It would be unwise for us to linger for too much longer.”

“I can’t imagine our enemy allowing us all to roam free,” Yusuke added. “We should all be cautious of our surroundings and never travel alone.”

Ryuji, seemingly back to normal, threw a fist into the air. “Ah, man, I can’t wait to shove this into Akechi’s face. He ain’t gonna come messin’ with us anymore!”

“On a serious note, we all need to be careful.” Morgana hopped up onto the bar to attract attention. “Akechi knows who we all are. They think they’ve taken care of Ren. I’m sure we’re all next on that list.”

“Your safety is now our number one priority.” Mitsuru came up behind her, her eyes sharp, her tone unwavering. “I have multiple agents assigned to be our eyes and ears on this case. One of the members of my team you all had met previously will be close by for when you are out and about. If you feel like you’re in danger, do not hesitate to let us know.”

It was a welcoming relief. It wasn’t unusual for her family as of late to feel threatened, but with Akechi holding the police in the palm of

his hand, he could send them after her any time. At least having more eyes on her friends would help her sleep at night.

Mitsuru handed them a small index card with the names of her operatives, along with their numbers. “Please do not hesitate to call or text me if anything is out of the ordinary. I trust my agents with my life. I promise you that we will keep you all safe until we are ready to strike.”

None of her friends showed any signs of doubt, and she was grateful. Makoto could trust Mitsuru with her life, as she had done numerous times in the past, but her friends didn’t have that relationship with her. Until recently. And after these last few hours, she hoped no one would ever worry about their safety as long as they were all working together.

“We should all head home.” Makoto felt hands on her shoulders, turning to find her mother smiling at the group. “I’m sure it’s been a long day for everyone.”

“I know a doctor that’s right around the corner.” She came to face Mitsuru, her concerns for Ren’s condition taking back over. “It’s where he buys all of our supplies. We can trust her.”

Ren also nodded his head. “I can call her up.” When he coughed, Makoto reached out and grabbed his hand. “I’m sure she’ll come right over hearing me sound like this.”

It hit her then that she was going to have to say goodbye to Ren right after she got him back. She figured it would be suspicious if she didn’t leave. The only reason she ever visited Leblanc was to see Ren or hold a meeting, which included Ren. Would she be able to see him, alone, without upsetting her friends, or drawing unwanted attention to herself?

They all split into different groups to head home. Ann, Ryuji, and Haru said their goodbyes, wished (or demanded) Ren recover quickly, then walked out the door with Ken. Yukari was the one who left with Yusuke, since she apparently had an apartment a few blocks away from where Yusuke was staying. That left her with her family, Mitsuru, and Futaba.

“I’ll get her home as soon as we’re done here,” Sojiro said, as if reading her mind. “You’ve all done enough for one night. I’ll make sure the doctor takes good care of him.”

It was wonderful to hear, yet saddening at the same time. It meant she couldn’t offer to stay and wait for the doctor. It meant she would have to leave Ren’s side when he needed her the most. He was safe at least, and that made her happy, but he could easily be taken away from her again…

“Makoto.”

The hushed voice made her turn to Ren, who had the same damn smile on his face as he had before. She felt that burning in her eyes and a pull on her lips and she didn’t know what to say to him.

“I’ll be okay.” He lifted the hand he still held onto and gently kissed it. “I promise I’ll sleep and be good so I’ll be better tomorrow when I see you again.”

“I’ll be with him, Makoto, so don’t worry.” Morgana wagged his tail happily, but his offer didn’t make her feel any better. “Takemi has the good stuff, so she’ll knock him out and he’ll be on his way to recovery in the morning!”

It wasn’t *“please stay with me,”* but she had to walk away. Morgana would comfort him if he couldn’t sleep, or had terrible nightmares. Sojiro wasn’t too far away either. She was exhausted and needed sleep, too. Her entire family did. It was for the best, but it was extremely difficult to accept.

She at least left him with one last kiss, a stern warning to get some sleep, then pulled her hand from his to head for the door. Her mother wrapped an arm around her shoulders to offer some sort of comfort, and it helped. As soon as she crossed the threshold into the night, she could have fallen asleep standing up.

“I will take you home.” Mitsuru guided them to another car, propped open the door, and Makoto was the first to step inside. She heard her mom and Sae and maybe Mitsuru arguing about something in the background, but she was so tired, and Mitsuru’s car was so big

and comfortable. Like her own personal train cabin where she could let the darkness and silence swallow her whole and pull her into unconsciousness…

Whatever the argument had been about, her mother clearly won, and Sae huffed as she came to sit down next to her. It woke her right up. “W-What happened?”

Her mom took the seat across from them as Mitsuru shut the door. “Oh, your sister thought she could take the trains home. I told her differently.”

Instead of the usual angry expression, her sister looked more… nervous, or uncomfortable. The silence that fell around them was thick with unspoken thoughts and words, and Makoto was eager to try and break the ice with a conversation.

However, Sae beat her to it. “I’m sorry.” Makoto looked over to her as she dropped her head into her hands. “I thought for the longest time you were one of them, Makoto, and had your father not kept standing in my way, I would have put you through the same hell I saw Amamiya go through. I hated Akihiko for keeping everything from me, but now I see he was just protecting you from the monster I really was.”

“Sis…” Makoto held her hands together on her lap, willing herself not to start crying now. “I…I never saw you as a monster. You were angry, yes, but I always thought you were more confused and using Dad as an outlet because he let you.” She tilted her head back to rest against her seat. “And you say you would have put me through hell, but I don’t believe you. Like you said, you *knew* , and you never fought through him. It wasn’t because you wanted more evidence. It was because you loved me.”

A small, but weak smile came to her sister’s face. “You always were the problem child.” Sae turned to face her, and Makoto nearly broke down because she was so *happy.* “Always breaking something, then hiding behind Mom and trying to convince her you were innocent with a look.”

“I never believed her,” her mom said softly. “She always tried to tell

me she was breaking into my secret stash of sweets because, oh, Sis told her to."

Sae narrowed her eyes at her and Makoto stared back at her mother, horrified. "I-I did not!"

Her mom continued to laugh. "You were quite the little liar, and the little thief. What I never told you was that you were really never any *good* at it."

She crossed her arms and huffed defiantly, earning another laugh from her mom.

"What was it?"

Sae's tone caught her off guard, and she had no idea what she was trying to ask her. "H-Huh?"

"My treasure," she continued, her eyes staring out through the windows. "What was it?"

It was a change of pace she didn't really like. They had been laughing like a *family* for the first time in years, and she didn't want to sour the mood over what may or may not have been the moment Sae birthed a palace…

"I-I don't know…" It was never actually visible, or stolen, so she couldn't tell her with certainty. However, "Your shadow made a comment that you had felt wronged, that the system that was supposed to protect you failed, and the people…w-who were to protect you…failed…A-And you had to stand up for yourself…"

Was that enough for her to realize that exact moment in her life? Makoto was sure there were a great number of times Sae thought her father had failed her, and he was a cop, so that meant the system failed her, too. The only thing that bothered her was the fact Sae's shadow never once spoke about their dad, with the exception of the first visit they ever made. If she was truly that upset with him, she would have said as much, right?

"My first closed case." Makoto turned to Sae quickly, surprised that she really did know what her shadow had been referring to. Or

maybe it shouldn't be a surprise at all, since her own subconscious had known…?

"We had been living in Tokyo for a few years, and one day, I was walking home from school when someone shoved me into an alleyway waving a knife at me. He stole my schoolbag, then took off before I could even wrap my head around what had happened."

Makoto's heart dropped into her stomach. This was the first time she was ever hearing about an attack on her sister. Was she too young to remember? She knew that if she was old enough, Sae's horror would not have been forgotten. But she didn't interrupt.

"I ran home, terrified, and of course I told Akihiko about it when he came home. He promised me he would find the man and throw him in prison. He would never be able to come after me again."

Makoto waited for what felt like an entire lifetime for Sae to continue the story. "He lied to me. He found my assailant and arrested him a week later. Even after I was able to identify him as the same man, a few days later, he released him. There was no trial. There was no punishment. My own *father* allowed someone to go unpunished, even after he promised me he would keep me safe."

She couldn't believe it. Why would her dad do that? To her sister? It was hard to think that Sae would be making anything up, or even being dramatic. To make it worse, her mom sighed deeply, closing her eyes like the memory was far too painful for her to remember.

"B-But…why?"

There had to be an explanation. Maybe Sae was about to tell her. "There wasn't a *why,* Makoto. All I kept thinking about was what would have happened if he went after me again. Or if you had been with me that day, or if he went after *you* . The only reason Akihiko didn't take the guy to trial was to keep me from mentioning anything about our relationship if the defense attorney asked. The same damn excuse he used to push me, all of us, out of his life."

Now Makoto really wished she could have kept the teasing going instead of what the conversation had become. She didn't want to be

pulled back into a dark pit of despair when everything was looking so much better for her future…

“That same man was arrested for another petty theft when I first became prosecutor. I learned then that his family was rich, but no matter how much money they were willing to throw at me, I took him to trial. Everyone told me it was unnecessary. It was too harsh when the criminal wanted a plea deal. I should have dropped the case entirely. But I wanted to prove to Akihiko that *this* was how he should have treated him all those years ago. I would prove to him that no one was above the law. And I *did* prove to him that I wasn’t a weak little coward who couldn’t protect his own *children!* I took an oath, to protect and to serve the citizens, and I didn’t let a little money or fear of uncovering some family ties keep me from doing my *job!”*

The silence that fell around them was just as deadly as Sae’s words. There was still so much anger for their father, even if it was hidden well. It broke her heart to know that this side of her sister was still *there* . Did that mean their family would never truly be happy unless they actually stole Sae’s treasure? Was it too late now? Was her palace still there, or was it gone because Sae was aware of it?

“From then on, every case I won was to show him what I was capable of, that I would never forgive him for everything he had done to me. One victory turned into two, then three, and then I refused to lose. It...it just may have blinded me more than I was willing to realize…”

Makoto’s hands tightened on her lap, unable to say anything in her dad’s defense, or to ease the pain Sae was clearly remembering. The outburst was hard to deal with, and the story even more so. Why couldn’t she remember that time period? Was she too young? She was sure she would know about her sister being so *angry* because Dad didn’t care about her safety. Sadly, Sae was nothing *but* angry with their dad, and she couldn’t pinpoint anything to help her develop any sort of argument.

Maybe there wasn’t a need for one. Maybe her dad really did let Sae down, and that had been some sort of turning point for him, too.

“Do you know why your father let him go, Sae?”

Makoto lifted her eyes to her mom just as she sighed heavily and lowered her head. Sae kept quiet beside her, but she knew there was a glare in her eyes as the air grew heavy in the car. “I was so mad at him for what he did, to the point I had plans to pack my things, bought three train tickets, and was going to move back to Iwatodai. I even called Yukari to tell her I was done, that he took it too far by jeopardizing the safety of my own children. He wouldn’t even say a damn word in his own defense, and that was the final straw for me.”

There had to be a reason her mother was speaking at all, but that didn’t stop the tears from forming in her eyes. Makoto eventually had to run a hand over her face so no one would catch her crying, but neither her sister nor her mother noticed. They just kept avoiding each other’s eyes, waiting, hiding…

Finally, her mother broke the barrier again. “What happened to you was terrifying for your age, yes, but your father was not *bribed* to release your assailant. This criminal, so desperate to stay out of jail, told your father that there was a girl your age working for *his* father as a sex slave. In exchange for the girl, the police let him go with a slap on the wrist.”

The atmosphere changed drastically when her mom leaned forward, eyes sharp, but her voice cracking. “This young girl had been missing for *weeks,* forced into a life she never asked for because she took a shortcut home one night . But what you don’t know is that *he* didn’t initially accept the deal. Akihiko tried to fight them, Sae, as uncharacteristic as it was for him. He loved you, and he made a promise to you, so he was going to defend you no matter the cost.”

Her mom wiped a few tears away, forcing Makoto to follow her actions. “In the end, he had a choice to make. He could have lost his position. He knew you could fight to defend yourself if you had to. He spent weeks following you to and from school to make sure you were okay.” She took a breath before continuing. “He didn’t want you to know, because in the end, he truly felt like he had betrayed you and this family. That he let his job come before his own daughter. I watched him slip away. I watched him hide from you. I

fought with him constantly about it. And maybe I was so focused on him that I never stopped to look at *you."*

The car came to a stop. It was hard to force herself to look out the window with the tears in her eyes and the weight on her heart. But they were home. And Makoto wanted nothing more than to jump out of the car, run up to her room, and throw herself onto her bed. Her mom took a deep breath, exhaled, then turned to pull the door open.

"Your father loves you so much, Sae. Every case he worked on, he thought of you and your sister. He thought about what he would do had *you* been the victim. And I should have told you all of this years ago. Because just like you, your father swore an oath to serve and protect. You came home that night. That girl had been missing for weeks. Deep down, I know your father would never have been able to forgive himself if he let a man selling off children *your age* walk free. So really, Sae, he was doing everything he could to protect *you* . *"*

Her mom stepped out of the car first, then ended with one last comment. "He never even told me any of this at first. Mitsuru did. She was so worried about his state of mind that she broke her promise to him and told me right before I left the city with the two of you. That was why I played the middleman with you and your dad. I only wish I would have tried harder…Maybe then none of this would have happened."

Makoto knew better than to keep her waiting once the silence returned. Her body felt so much heavier, like she was running a marathon she hadn't trained for and the finish line was in her reach. She picked up one foot, then another, then another, until she was finally close enough to the door to feel the cooler breeze.

Her dad had shown her that night, months ago, on their first trip to Kabukicho as his trainee, that sometimes, petty criminals gave way to bigger criminals. Maybe now she could understand why he seemed so *sad* talking to her about how things weren't textbook, black and white, and clear as day. He had to make a difficult choice to save someone else, someone who was in far greater danger, even if it hurt his own daughter.

To have that kind of heart… Her dad really was a wonderful person. Hopefully now, Sae would respect that, since she was older and less angry now, and maybe they would be able to talk things over.

She made a mistake of turning to say goodnight to her sister. Sae looked like she had taken their mother's story *terribly* . Her head was resting against one of her hands, staring out the window. In her eighteen years of living, she had only caught Sae crying once or twice, that she could remember. The sight of tears on her sister's face made her goodnight get caught in her throat.

"Thank you, Makoto."

She never expected Sae to be able to say anything to her before she took off out of the car. "H-Huh?"

Sae looked right at her, and right then, she knew her sister was back. Maybe in some sense, her mother had taken the treasure out of her heart by clearing up all the misunderstood actions and emotions that kept her so spiteful. She watched Sae brush a thumb under her eyes, but all Makoto could do was try and keep herself from shattering into a million little pieces.

"You saved me." A small trace of a smile came to her face. It made her happy to see, given the tension that had nearly killed them all on the drive. "I can't even imagine how difficult that had to have been for you to stand up to someone you love, but you fought through that to save me. You truly are a wonderful sister, Makoto. Thank you."

She was so happy that she started crying all over again. "I love you, Sis."

It was faint, but she heard her sister chuckle. "I love you, too, Makoto. Now, don't keep Mom waiting. It's cold outside."

Makoto couldn't do anything but laugh and nod her head, stepping out of the car completely. As soon as she was out, her mom shut the door, and the car drove off. Her mom placed a hand on her shoulder, but neither one of them said anything as they walked inside and to their apartment.

When they both practically stumbled into the entryway, Makoto realized she had yet to see her father since he left her that morning at the train station. It was late, late enough that he should be home, but she still jumped in her place when he came around the corner.

He looked them both over to see if they were okay, but Makoto didn't give him any real chance to examine them. She collided into him, squeezing him as hard as she could. He was alive. Ren was alive. Her sister was alive. The worst part of her life was over. She owed him so much. And after what happened in the car, all she could do was hug him and promise herself that no matter what he chose to do, right or wrong, she would always love him.

He was a hero. He was her dad. He suffered greatly and asked nothing out of either her or her sister or her mother. He protected her and her sister without them even knowing it. He would do anything for them. He loved them all so much, and she couldn't even begin to put into words how much she loved him.

But she tried. "I…I love you so much, Dad."

He returned the embrace much weaker, but just as meaningful. He rested his head on top of hers, and she enjoyed the calming sound of his heartbeat. "I love you, too."

Somewhere in between her sobs, his heartbeat, and her mom's hand running over her back, the world slipped away from her until it lulled her to sleep in her dad's arms.

Chapter 162

Chapter 162

He would never know how he was able to stay composed at work with the chaos unfolding around him.

Akihiko had used the excitement to his benefit and told his fellow coworkers that he needed a break from the noise. Yukari had sent him a text, something asinine that he didn't reply to, a signal that she had found the cat and that things were going as they had planned. He snuck past everyone, without even really trying, walked down the stairs to the hall of interrogation rooms, and let Yukari and Morgana in through the unguarded exit. It was easy from there, hiding in a free interrogation room, waiting for the trigger to change that cat to his "weird" other self.

Akihiko and Yukari both got the shock of their lives when the world twisted for half a second and some monster cat had told them they were in the Metaverse. Thankfully, they both had the sense not to scream, or that could have easily been their downfall.

"H-How did you do that?!"

"It doesn't matter," Akihiko said, cracking the door open to make sure the coast was clear. That had been when he saw Sae standing in the middle of the hall, gripping the phone she had just used unknowingly, trying to decide if she needed to stop Akechi or *something.*

He was lucky he had good reflexes and caught her right before she marched ahead. That would have ruined everything, too. She was terrified, that was to be expected, but she ran with everything they had told her. At any time, she could have yelled or screamed or stormed off, but she didn't. Given Morgana's appearance, he was quite impressed she didn't pass out.

The third phase of the plan was over with two gunshots. He hadn't expected two, but it was too late to question it now. After the coast

was clear, it was all about the timing. But he sure as hell took several seconds to himself, overwhelmed that Amamiya was alive and Akechi hadn't caught on to their heist. Things had worked out thus far, and everything was looking good for their future.

Walking away from Sae was one of the hardest things he had to do that day. She was terrified, lost, confused, and all he could do was hold her like she was a child again and needing him to keep the scary monsters away. In fact, nothing would have gone well had it not been for her, and that spoke volumes more to him than any other conversation they had in the past.

The station was a *mess* . As Akechi had fired his weapon in the Metaverse, Akihiko didn't think anyone would hear it. However, as one of his men approached him in a panic, he realized the news had spread just as quickly.

"That boy. He killed himself! How the hell did he get a gun past security?!"

He took the time to appear dazed and confused, something that did *not* go unnoticed by the people he thought would be watching him. "Something wrong, Sanada?"

The police commissioner walked right up to him, a smug look on his face, but he continued to pretend he hadn't seen said boy and that said boy was on his way out the door. For added effect, Akihiko dropped onto the desk behind him and kept his eyes on the floor.

"Pity, right?" The man chuckled darkly. "I guess not everyone can handle the pressure of being caught after months of causing terror. Better to take the easy way out." Then, he stepped right into his line of sight. "And you're next."

Despite how badly he wanted to throw out a barb, it wasn't the right time. If he acted anything but horrified and stunned, they were bound to pick up on the reason for his security. That and he assumed it was only a matter of time before someone realized that there wasn't a body to corroborate Akechi's statement.

Mitsuru had told him not to worry about it, and at the time, he didn't

even care. Amamiya was safe. Sae was safe. As of now, no one had suspected a thing. All he had to do was last another hour, try and calm the younger, more naïve officers down, and pray the media didn't show up and start poking around about how a child killed himself in a police station.

He didn't intend on spending any time with Akechi, but he of course would have other plans for him. "Good evening, Sanada."

He trapped him in his office just as he was about to start heading out. It was a nuisance, but he could deal with him. He just had to act surprised and upset and at a loss for words.

"What can I do for you?" He pat himself on the back for sounding as exhausted as he really was, and it seemed to satisfy Akechi as well.

The teen lowered himself into a seat and Akihiko cursed under his breath. "Tragic, isn't it? What do you think Makoto is going to say when you have to tell her the news?"

Akechi rarely came to speak to him just because, but mentioning his daughter after he had the gall to try and kill an innocent person angered him greatly. It was hard, but he had no choice but to keep his mouth shut, worried that he wouldn't be able to keep the charade going if he said anything.

It made Akechi grow complacent. "Right here, in her own father's domain. With her own sister pushing him to commit the ultimate sin." He chuckled weakly, then brought his eyes up to meet his own. "The police will be out looking for the rest of them. They know who they are, where they live, who they're close to. How much pressure do you think it will take for Makoto to break and join her precious lover in hell?"

The game was over. The threat crossed a line. "Tell me something, Akechi. How does it feel to be your father's puppet? Killing off a few corrupt adults for his sake is one thing; executing a child because Shido's afraid of him is kinda, I guess, *pathetic* ."

Akechi sat completely still, blank expression, a straightened back, but Akihiko continued to dig his claws into the boy. "I'm sure Shido

was pretty disappointed in you when you failed to kill me in the Metaverse. I'm sure taking out the Phantom Thieves would have earned you a great pat on the back."

The boy breathed out a laugh, then another, until he lifted a hand to the side of his head. Akihiko clearly struck a nerve, so now he had to be careful. He had never seen Akechi snap, but he could tell he was standing on the edge of his composure.

Good. "I can see why you and Sae had a weak sort of friendship. I may not have been the best father, but at least I loved her. Can you say the same about *your* father? Or is that why you feel so obligated to impress him, so you can earn his love after years of him abandoning you?"

The mood darkened instantly. Akechi gave off a chilling laugh, then lowered his fists onto the arms of his chair. The rage swirling in his eyes was more intimidating than Akihiko was going to admit. "I want you to go home tonight, and I want you to hold your children as close to you as you can. Tell your wife you love her. You're never going to see them again, Akihiko. I'll make sure of that."

His words cut him right through his core, but instead of freaking out or assaulting Akechi in his own office, he snickered at him. "Well if you're in charge of killing people, I think they're pretty safe."

Akechi pushed himself to his feet, his eyes darkening to the point he didn't even recognize him. Akihiko began to worry he may have pushed him too far. "Makoto may be a force to deal with, but Amamiya won't be around to save her. And I'll make sure she suffers twice as much as I've ever had to suffer my entire life."

When Akechi turned and slammed the door behind him, Akihiko almost threw up. He had dealt with his fair share of teenage criminals in the past. None of them were truly frightening, even if some of them were dangerous with weapons or unpredictable when high on drugs. Akechi would be the first one he could say he was honestly afraid of. He knew what he was capable of while maintaining an image of respect for the public. To have that kind of mental switch was a sign of horrifying trauma.

Maybe instead of insulting him, Akihiko could have tried to understand him. Like he would have any other deranged child.

He tried to kill you, then Amamiya, and now he's threatened your family. Screw him.

For now, Akechi walking away infuriated would likely either blow up in his face, or work in his favor. Anger clouded judgment, caused even the smartest of people to do the dumbest of things, so hopefully Akechi would make a drastic mistake. Or he could panic, realize he was greatly outclassed, and give up without a fight.

Akihiko laughed to himself at that one. Akechi, giving up? He had greater chances of Shido coming out and confessing all his crimes to the public before election day.

…Huh…

Would the Phantom Thieves be able to go after Shido? Would he have a palace? He had to. If Sae had one for a few terrible life choices and bouts of anger, someone like Shido was bound to have one. Amamiya would need his rest, but it could also be an explosive revelation if he made himself known to Akechi or Shido right before they all put an end to both of them.

They would need to hurry, though. The election would happen next month. Amamiya would likely be out for a good portion of it. Maybe Mitsuru would allow her team to go and help? They might not be as young and agile as the Phantom Thieves, but they were intelligent and able. Minako had told him before that with a lot of work, their old team had managed to summon their personas all those weeks ago.

But, first thing was first. He needed to get home. Akechi's threat was terrifying, and he wanted to make sure Minako, Sae, and Makoto got home okay. They should all be at Leblanc by now, so he grabbed his phone and sent a quick text to Mitsuru, asking her if she could take his family home. He avoided telling her *why* , but keeping them off the trains and the streets would make him feel so much better.

He was also grateful that he could use the excuse of his surgery and being out of shape to head out while people were still in a frenzy. He

figured those who wanted him gone wouldn't miss him for the night, and those who cared and wished he could have stayed would understand. His body was much more alert and attuned to the people around him on his way home. No one appeared threatening, but it didn't make him any less anxious. All Akechi had to do was send one message to Shido or his friends, and the target on his back would be so much bigger.

Would Akechi tell Shido that he knew the truth? He had been *trying* to see if that was the link between them, and Akechi all but gave him his answer. However, Akechi didn't seem like the type to whine and cry to dear ol' daddy because he got his feelings hurt. Not that Akechi wasn't frightening on his own…

Akihiko practically broke the door down trying to get inside the apartment, then was quick to shut it and lock it. In all his years as a cop, no one had ever invaded his home to try and kill him, but he worried that was about to change. It was the first time since he had left the Metaverse that evening that he felt like he could *breathe* again. Mitsuru was with plenty of other people right now, so his family was just as safe. Tomorrow might be a different story, but for now, he had to worry about one day at a time.

Once he caught his breath, he jumped right back into pacing around the apartment. He had no idea when to expect Minako and Makoto home. Would Sae be with them, too? Was she still mad at him? And if so, would someone at least stay with her so he knew she was okay? How were they all supposed to carry on like normal to deflect attention when they were all still in such grave danger?

They had succeeded in keeping Amamiya and Sae safe, but the reality of what they had done was now hitting him. Their enemy would know exactly where to look the second they suspected anything. They sure as hell couldn't go public and announce that there was a missing body after the media had already taken Akechi at his word, which would make it hard to know what their next step was. They would have to act fast, given Amamiya could expose a deadly secret if they didn't find him.

The other kids were in serious trouble, too. He didn't know if the enemy knew how many of them were involved, but Akechi knew

each member of the Phantom Thieves personally. They would know where they all lived in a matter of days. If Akechi had been able to convince an army of police officers to capture Amamiya, he didn't want to think about what he would do to get the rest of them.

"How much pressure do you think it will take for Makoto to break and join her precious lover in hell?"

Akihiko would have done anything to keep Makoto and Sae out of harm's way, but there was little he could do for their state of mind. Sae had to keep reporting to work if she didn't want the eyes on her. Makoto had to keep going to school. He couldn't physically watch them every second of every day, as much as he wished he could, and that was likely to bring them a great deal of anxiety. The same could be said about the other teens, as they had to keep up appearances, too. All the while, he had to work and try to keep himself focused…

The door opened and he immediately ran over to the front door. Minako and Makoto looked over at him like he had startled them, but then Makoto rushed up to him and hugged him around the waist.

"I want you to go home tonight, and I want you to hold your children as close to you as you can."

And he did. He held her as best he could without hurting her, told her he loved her, and let her quietly cry into his shirt. Minako came up to them shortly after, wrapping her arms around both of them like a blanket.

"You did it."

To be honest, they had only seen the tip of the iceberg, but he kept that to himself. Right now, he was home, his family was safe, they were with him. Nothing was more important.

He only wished Sae could have been with them. "Where's Sae?"

When Minako chuckled into his shoulder, the dread that followed his question lifted from his heart. "Mitsuru is going to stay with her tonight. They both still have a lot to go over."

Her words zapped his last reserves of energy and he collapsed against her. He was exhausted. Everyone was safe. It would be a great time to finally catch up on some much needed sleep and be ready for whatever the day brought in the morning. The only reason he didn't fall to the floor and tell Minako he would sleep there had been because he had to catch Makoto before *she* fell to the floor. Minako laughed softly, kissed his cheek, then took a step back.

"I think you both will sleep good tonight."

Akihiko found enough strength to carry Makoto, who was out like a light, into her room and place her on the bed. Helping her under the blankets and tucking her in made her look like she was a child again, the hyper and destructive toddler who finally spent all her energy running around fighting him. He brushed a few strands of hair off her face, which made her shift on the bed, but she never woke up. There was a weak curve to her lips, knowing she was safe and that everything was okay. It made him laugh, drop a quick kiss on the top of her head, then slowly stood up to let her rest.

Minako, however, wasn't willing to let him crash just yet. He didn't think he had the strength to entertain what she was thinking, but the second her lips were on his, he found it. She clung to him, her grip on the back of his shirt giving her an outlet for all the emotions she had to have been feeling. Both their daughters were okay. Their friends were okay. And maybe if he was lucky, he'd be able to sit down and talk to Sae as father and daughter soon.

He could die happy then. He might even die right after that, being far too happy to be able to contain it.

"Tell your wife you love her."

Akihiko leaned back enough, hovering over her on the bed, trying to get the words out while fighting back the burning in his eyes, his throat… "I love you."

She held his face with both of her hands. "You saved my children, Aki. You've brought Sae back to us. I-I wish I knew how to tell you how much this means to me."

He smiled at her, lowering his head to rest on top of hers. “You don’t have to say anything.”

“I love you.” She pressed herself up to kiss him lightly. “I love you so much.”

He had no idea how he managed to keep up with her, or not collapse on top of her and pass out, but he never fell asleep so quickly in his life. Somewhere in the background of his mind, he thought he heard Minako laughing at him sweetly, brushing her fingers through his hair, softly kissing the crown of his head and whispering words he couldn’t make out. Eventually, it all faded into darkness, and for once, he welcomed it.

“You’re never going to see them again, Akihiko. I’ll make sure of that.”

He shot up in the bed, shaking and struggling to pull any air into his lungs. It was dark, just like that night Akechi tried to kill him in the Metaverse, and he suddenly didn’t know what was real or a part of that world.

“Aki?”

The presence beside him made him bite back a scream, even though a few seconds later, he realized it was Minako. Her hand on his chest brought him back down on the bed, and her eyes were easy to find, even in the darkness.

“You’re okay.”

He slowly began to feel like he could breathe, the darkness wasn’t going to take everything he loved away, and everyone was safe and resting. Minako sat by his side, comforting him with a hand in his hair and a hand over his heart. Her voice was like a quiet serenade, calming him to the point he could have fallen back asleep. But he knew what would be waiting for him on the other side. He wasn’t about to hear that damn voice again.

Instead, he just laid there, letting Minako ease the tension out of his body like she was good at. When she started to see he wasn’t eager

to fall back asleep, she shifted at his side to lay next to him. He grabbed her hand on his chest as she got comfortable against him. Neither one of them said anything to each other. Simply being this close to her brought him peace. It stilled his thoughts, gave him something to hold on to, and kept him warm and *alive.* It may not have been sleep, but it replenished him just as well.

A few minutes later, or hours, he wasn't sure anymore, he heard Minako giggle into his shoulder. "We should probably get up. Makoto is going to demand that big breakfast she's been spoiled with lately."

He had no idea what time it was, but Minako rarely got out of bed in the middle of the night unless she had to. Makoto didn't have school, but with the disaster that was Amamiya's supposed suicide, he would be expected to show up for work. He would also like to know how things were going, maybe get in touch with Sae on his way in…

Minako pushed herself up off of him after a kiss, then stretched out her back before she got out of bed completely. He missed her presence terribly. "You know, our yearly tradition of hanging Christmas lights is in two weeks."

His heart slammed against his ribcage. "O-Oh…"

"I'm sure I can convince Sae to come this year." Her smile was genuine, and the tone in her voice was serene. It made him believe that they could have that family moment she had been waiting for *years* to have, that *he* had been waiting most of his life to have again.

"I-I hope so…"

Minako looked like she wanted to say something, but she shook her head. He was going to ask about it, but she cut him off. "I'll talk to her soon. I'm sure she's really busy right now. But don't worry, Aki. She'll be here. I think she wants to have a chance to talk to you."

It was the way she said it that took the breath out of him. Was she serious? Minako wouldn't dangle that wish in front of him without meaning it. She knew how to read her children better than he knew how to read *her.* If she really thought Sae would want to talk to him,

he knew it would happen.

That feeling was enough to push him out of bed and back into her arms. He had to fight the wave of emotions that almost turned him into a blubbering idiot. If Minako noticed, she said nothing and held onto him tighter.

Eventually, he composed himself and pulled away from her. A laugh broke out in the room as he opened his mouth to tell her he loved her and his stomach grumbled. He hadn't really eaten in quite some time, but hearing her laugh made him forget about his stomach altogether.

God it felt so good to feel like this again.

"Let's get you some breakfast, honey." She grabbed his hand as she wiped her eyes. "It's the most important meal of the day, after all."

While Minako started her prep work in the kitchen, Akihiko sat himself down with a cup of coffee and checked his phone. Several coworkers were trying to reach him about a million different things. Voicemails, texts, emails, it seemed unending. Nothing at the station calmed down overnight, and if he told everyone he didn't want to come in without being *dead* , they would come find him regardless.

It was the plan anyway, but he didn't like it. Akechi could be anywhere, ready to strike at any time. Makoto had to meet with her team and Mitsuru to discuss what was happening next. He didn't want Minako to leave the house unless she absolutely had to, so he sent a quick message to Mitsuru to see if she could have someone take Makoto to their hideout.

Telling Minako to stay home would be difficult without revealing to her *why* he wanted her to stay. "Um, Minako?"

She likely didn't hear him, so he got up off the couch to lean up against the wall as he watched her work. "Minako."

She turned to him, then smiled and waved her hand and returned to work. "It's gonna have to wait, Aki. I'll entertain your thoughts after breakfast."

He had to cough into his hand. “I actually need to go into work.” He noticed she came to a stop. “I know, it’s the weekend, but with everything that’s happened, people need me to show up. But, I…I don’t want you to leave the house.”

Minako spun on her heels and he worried he had upset her. “You want to go back into the same place that allowed Ren to get *killed?* What is wrong with you?”

Akihiko held up his hands. “It’s going to look suspicious if I *don’t* go in. That and I can keep tabs on what they’re doing. I’d only go crazy sitting here anyway.”

A heartbreaking expression came to her face, and he had to look away. She was worried, and she had every right to be, but it was either he pull attention at work, or at home with her. He wasn’t about to have that. Slowly, he walked up to her, waiting for the moment she would lash out at him, but she never did.

“I’m sorry, Minako, but I have to do this.” He wrapped his arm around her and she fell against him with no resistance. “I won’t stay long. Mitsuru will hopefully come pick Makoto up to take her to her meeting. I’ll come right home and maybe take the next day off if that will make you feel better.”

She breathed out a laugh into his chest, but her arms remained at her side. “You won’t. Because you know what you need to do, and sitting here at home will get you nowhere.” Then, she took him by surprise and grabbed his collar and pulled him down into her face. “But so help me god, Aki, if you do anything to get yourself killed, I’ll never forgive you.”

Now it was his turn to laugh. “Oh, I don’t plan on dying yet. I have a Christmas tradition to look forward to as a family. I wouldn’t miss that for anything.”

He felt so much better when a smile returned to her face. “You better do more than instigate a fight with Makoto like you do every year.”

“It’s not my fault I’m not an interior decorator.”

She slapped him and took a few steps back. “No. You’re a cop. One who’s going to go out there and arrest all the bad guys who’ve had it out for us since day one. Maybe next year you can be the family’s interior decorator.”

The seriousness in her tone gave him newfound strength. He would go out and bring every one of Shido’s associates to justice. He would keep his family safe. Akechi wouldn’t get the best of him. “Private tour guide for my wife sounds like a better job to apply for.”

Minako threw her arms around his neck and laughed into his shoulder. “That sounds like the perfect job for you.” He gave her a kiss as she separated from him, but then she quickly turned around to resume her role as house chef. “But you will eat breakfast before you leave.”

He tried to make it last as long as he could. Makoto was still asleep, and he wasn’t about to wake her up just to eat. Minako listed all the places she wanted to see in Tokyo, all the cities she wanted to travel to once Makoto was in college (he internally cringed at that thought), and where she thought they could all spend a getaway weekend as a family.

“The quicker you find your criminals, the quicker we can start planning.”

His stomach full, his heart full, and his mind ready to make that dream a reality, he gave her one last kiss before he headed for the door. “Maybe it will be our Christmas present this year.”

“Having you and Sae here will be all I’d ever want, Aki.”

He’d make it happen. He owed it to her, and a part of him thought it was okay to be selfish and want it for himself. Shido would have to be dealt with by Christmas, so how great would that be if he could wrap up his biggest case ever and be home with Minako and his kids?

The image alone was one hell of a motivator as he walked right into the police station like it was a normal day. The second he was inside, five officers ran up to him and started shouting about what

they were going to do.

Akihiko tried to settle them down. “Hey, hey, we’ll work something out. Just…give me some space.”

“What if the press hears about this?”

“Are we going to lose our jobs?”

“That kid didn’t have a gun! He didn’t! I know he didn’t!”

“I think Akechi killed him!”

That shook him up. “W-What?”

The young officer who shouted the accusation bounced around on his feet. “Think about it. He’s down there. He’s the one who comes back up and says that he killed himself without batting an eye. He’s always been against the Phantom Thieves. No one would have checked *him* for a gun!”

The other officers went silent around him, but Akihiko worried that one of them may be a snitch to Shido and now he was put on the spot. It was a great deduction, and had he been alone with the officer, he would have told him as much, and that he agreed.

Trying to disprove it was heartbreaking. “I don’t think Akechi would have killed someone. He might get on my nerves from time to time, but he’s not a murderer.”

Another officer nodded in agreement. “He wasn’t alone, either. Niijima-san was with him, too.”

Not what he was hoping would come up.

“Yeah, and if she was with him, that little shit wouldn’t have done anything.”

“Then how the fuck is one kid *dead?”*

Akihiko raised his hands to keep them from biting each other’s heads off. “C’mon guys. There’s not a room in this building that’s not

watched by camera. We can pull the surveillance film and see if we can find out what happened."

One of them shook his head. "No can do. The brass already has it. And they all say he killed himself."

Odd, but not completely out of character for them. By allowing officers without ties to Shido find out that the cameras were magically "off" or not working in that one room, questions would come up. He also hoped that Fuuka had worked her magic successfully so that they didn't question why *other* cameras had been offline for a few seconds…

"Then Akechi really did kill him!" The officer took a step forward. "Think about it, Sanada. He worked with the brass to get you arrested several times. They all despise you. Akechi had the motive, the means, and the opportunity. Your daughter is lucky to have escaped unhurt!"

Finally, he was forced to put an end to the discussion. "I'll look into it. Until then, don't go around saying things you can't *prove."*

After that, he pushed past the small group and headed for his office. It wasn't a surprise that everyone knew Sae was his daughter, but it would take some getting used to hearing someone speak so casually about her. Was it a set-up? Had he brought her up to see how he reacted? Or was he genuinely trying to convince him that Akechi was the bad guy?

Well, he was, but he knew better than to come right out and say it.

The day was a disaster. Officers kept popping into his office to ask him what to do, or to share their thoughts on what had happened. He managed to speak to a few of the guards, who, not surprisingly, didn't recall anything. Even if he was asking for show, it was still annoying. Akechi couldn't have just waltzed right down into the interrogation rooms without *someone* noticing him.

Sadly for him, the pool of possible men he could trust were looking shallow at best. No one wanted to talk except that one officer who made the initial comment. Everyone else knew nothing. A lot of them

actually seemed uninterested, like a child didn't die in their station, where a weapon happened to sneak by them.

Even more interesting, the media had been awfully quiet. Any other case and any other person, they would be eating this weakness alive. There were no protests for stricter policies, or even on weapons in general. Everyone in Japan had to know that the leader of the Phantom Thieves was dead, yet at the same time, no one *cared.*

Akihiko may have greatly underestimated Shido. It made him sick to think about how well-drawn out his plan had been and how deep his resources really were. And had it not been for one phone call, one tiny slip up Akechi had made, they may be playing a different ball game right now.

"Sanada."

It was also the first time that day that the brass had even bothered to approach him. The police commissioner stood in the doorframe of his office, but the last thing Akihiko wanted to do was listen to what he had to say. "I'm busy."

"Busy enough to let your family suffer at the hands of terrifying shadows in the Metaverse?"

He dropped his pen. His heart came to an abrupt stop. Had there not been a desk between the two of them, he would have strangled him. "Excuse me?"

"Akechi figured you needed a reminder of what we're capable of."

No.

He was trying to get under his skin. Sae had witnessed firsthand what kind of monster Akechi was. Makoto would have killed him, but she would be at home with Minako. So how…

When he snapped out of the terror gripping his heart, he realized the commissioner was gone. Akihiko grabbed his jacket from the back of his chair and almost threw his desk out of his way. When he reached the door, he gripped the edge of the frame, rested against

it, and tried to remind himself it was all a game. There was no way.

“You’re never going to see them again, Akihiko. I’ll make sure of that.”

Shaking and nauseous, he pulled out his phone to call Minako to see where she was. If she was home, like she *would* be, he could play off his call and ask her if she needed anything from the store or if he could walk Makoto to her meeting. He would call Sae afterwards, see where she was, if she needed anything…

He called Sae a total of three times. She never picked up.

He called Minako to check in at home. *She* never picked up...

“You’re never going to see them again, Akihiko.”

Over my dead body.

Now, he just had to hope he made it in time.

Chapter 163

Chapter 163

The silence that followed after Akihiko left consumed her.

Minako was exhausted. She thought she had slept rather well that night. She probably needed to get up and do something, but as Akihiko demanded her to stay home, she couldn't. A nap would be in order. He told her he would try and come home early, so maybe she could start searching for all the Christmas decorations because the image was already in her head.

Finally. *Finally* they could spend the day as a family. If Sae's reaction last night was any indicator, all Minako would have to do was offer an invitation and she would be there. Akihiko would be so overjoyed. It had been so long since he was truly happy, and she was going to do whatever it would take to give him that moment.

"M-Mom?"

Right. Makoto at least looked like she slept well, or she hoped she did. Rarely did she pass out like she had, and even more rare, wake up so late. Seeing her rubbing her eyes brought a smile to her face. "Good morning."

Makoto looked around the room, then her eyes landed on her. "Where's Dad?"

"He thought it was best to go into work, check on some things," she told her. "I made breakfast."

Makoto smiled lazily at her. "I'm really hungry."

It was likely a long day for both her and her father. Minako pushed herself to her feet and approached her daughter. "Let's get you fed then. I'm sure you're ready to go see your boyfriend."

Makoto stiffened when she threw an arm around her shoulder. Her

face darkened as well. “M-Mom!”

“I saw how hard it was for you to walk away from him.” She meant it, and saying it out loud made her heart heavy. It had been relatively hard to let Akihiko walk away from her that morning, too. “I know Mitsuru is going to be over to pick you up later today, but I can take you over there if you want to be there earlier.”

It would greatly upset Akihiko if he found out, but it wasn’t like she would be roaming around town and stopping a million different places. Makoto probably wanted to spend as much time as she could with Ren. She had been pacing so much while she waited for him to show up at the coffee shop. She knew better than to keep Makoto locked up at home with her thoughts.

Plus, Minako could take care of herself.

She pulled on Makoto’s shoulder to get her moving towards the kitchen. “You worked so hard, Makoto. I can’t even imagine what it was like, sitting and waiting for him to walk through the door. I’m not going to keep you cooped up here when I know you want to see him.”

Her daughter tilted her head back with a growing smile. “T-Thank you.”

And her punchline. “And I know he won’t be able to sleep with you, so letting the two of you be alone won’t bother me too much.”

Makoto’s hands flew to her face while Minako laughed next to her. “Mom!”

“Every good day starts with a good breakfast.” She released her, and Makoto took off into the kitchen without waiting for her. Minako continued to laugh to herself, the action making her feel so much lighter than she had all morning after Akihiko left. A part of her wanted to be selfish and keep Makoto at home, but to keep her away from Ren after all they had been through would make her feel terrible. That and Akihiko would hopefully be home before Makoto had to go meet with her friends.

Hopefully.

Why was she feeling so… *sick* all the sudden?

Stress. It had been a painfully long few weeks. Now that she could breathe again, her body wasn't used to it. At least, that was what she was going to keep telling herself…

"Mom?"

Minako hadn't realized she had spaced out until Makoto called out to her. "Huh?"

She gave her a puzzled look, but didn't question her. "C-Can I take a plate to Ren?"

She broke out into another laugh. "That is such a cute idea, Makoto. Are you going to lie and tell him you made it?"

A grumble came from the kitchen, but Makoto didn't answer her. It wouldn't matter in the end, and if it made her happy, she didn't care. Makoto was a fairly good cook anyway. Ren wouldn't notice the difference.

Makoto was dressed and fed and ready to go before Minako had even realized she had finished eating. She was going to make a comment about it, but chose not to. Her smirk seemed to do what her words would have. Makoto huffed, held her bag tightly, then reached for the door to avoid looking at her.

"I'll take you to Yongen-Jaya Station and you can walk the rest of the way, okay?" She grabbed Makoto's shoulder to get her attention. "Your father is a little worried about us being out without someone with us, so make sure you text me when you get there. I know it's only a block, but please. And let me know when you're leaving, and don't leave without someone."

Thankfully, Makoto nodded her head without contest. The walk to the train station was quiet, but not unpleasant. There was a certain bounce in Makoto's step that made her happy. Her baby girl was all grown up, getting ready to leave the house and start her own life, and she hoped that Ren stayed a part of it. He was a great kid. He

had been willing to sacrifice his life to save Sae, and Minako would never be able to thank him enough.

It also felt weird following Makoto to a place she had been a few times, but usually side by side with Akihiko. She missed him terribly in that moment, but she shrugged it off. But there was a pain in her heart that she couldn't get to go away. Why? Right. Stress. And he was jittery that night. She worried about him more than she probably should have…

"This way, Mom."

She was starting to space out more than she ever had in one day. Makoto either didn't notice or felt uncomfortable asking her about it. Or maybe she knew why she was acting odd. Or maybe she didn't notice because she was ready to see someone she thought was *dead* …

Stop it.

She would take a nap when she got home. The house would be quiet and she would be bored anyway. So long as Akihiko came home and didn't decide to stick around at work all damn day. Maybe she would pop in the coffee shop and get something to drink to help wake her up. The apartment could use some cleaning up. She hadn't really been in a cooking mood recently. There was *something* she could do.

"Are you okay?"

Minako tried to play it off as fatigue. "I'm a little tired. I'll just take a nap when I get home."

"O-Oh…"

She elbowed Makoto in the side while they waited for the train to Yongen-Jaya. "Wouldn't want to make you take care of me when you can take care of a cute boy."

Makoto gave her a look, a warning that she had said too much, and Minako was thankful that it hadn't been a busy morning. "Sorry."

There was a much more awkward silence that fell around them. She could tell that Makoto was trying to break the ice, but didn't know how. Minako just put a hand on her shoulder and pat her lightly. "Bring your dad home some coffee at least, okay?"

The tension dispelled and Makoto turned with a smile. "What will he like?"

"You should know the answer to that," she said with a playful roll of the eyes. "Just ask Sakura-san."

"R-Right."

It was hard as hell getting off the train and not embarrassing Makoto by being an overprotective mother who *just* got her family back for the first time in years. All she did was hold up her phone, watch Makoto nod her head, and walk out into the city without that motherly hug. Minako sat in a chair to wait for the train *back* to Shibuya, gripping her phone tightly in her hand. She was tempted to send a message to Akihiko, but if he was busy, she didn't want to bother him. She almost did the same for Sae. The more time ticked by while she waited for Makoto's text, the more her heart started to hammer in her chest.

Everything was okay, so why was she feeling like something was *wrong?*

The jolt in her hand as her phone vibrated caused her to jump and her phone fell to the ground. Yep. She needed a nap. She was losing her mind. She had no reason. Exhaustion. Her body needed rest.

I made it!

Minako exhaled loudly, too tired to even respond with something witty or cute. The ride back to Shibuya wasn't a long one, but she could have sworn she fell asleep against the pole. She now understood how people could fall asleep on the train…

Shibuya Station was huge. However, ever since she had been taken to that twisted dimension, she looked at it in a new light. She didn't

like it, and she wasn't about to linger. It wasn't unusual that she felt sick as she walked to her next line, but the sickness felt more like a pressure. It was similar to when she was in the Metaverse and searching for that damn blue light to lead her to the Velvet Room. Was this a sign? Was she really feeling the effects of being in the Metaverse for too long? Was it a *bad* thing? No one else seemed to feel like this, and her friends had been more active than she had been.

Her fatigue, the sickness, the dizziness, it all disappeared as her eyes caught that detective bastard speaking to her daughter. Ignoring the voice in the back of her head telling her Sae could take care of herself and that this was a terrible idea, she ran right over to them like they were long, lost friends.

"Oh, hi!" She tried to tone it down, especially since both Akechi and Sae looked surprised to see her. All she really wanted to do was punch him in the face, grab Sae, and ask her why the hell she was associating with him. He had tried (and failed) to kill Ren, and while Sae might not know he was dating her sister, she *knew* he was important to her. That much was obvious when they all met last night. So why was she here?

Sae glared angrily at her. "What are you doing here?"

Hoping to get her away from him without drawing attention, Minako grabbed her wrist. "I heard there was a new coffee shop that opened up. Do you want to come with me?"

Akechi smiled like she had been talking to him. She almost slapped it off of his face. "Oh, it's okay, Sae-san. We can get that sushi another time."

Something changed the next second. It was like someone had punched her square in the gut. Sae caught her as she leaned forward, but she did not miss the look on Akechi's face. When she righted herself, one hand reached over to hold on to Sae while the other started to move to her bag for her phone. Something was very wrong. Akihiko was going to kill her for leaving the house, but he would come out and get Akechi away from her.

Another man came into view. Minako recognized him from somewhere, but she couldn't remember where. Given her state of mind, that would be natural. If only she could find her damn phone.

Sae, however, seemed to know who this man was. "K-Kishida? W-What are you doing here?"

Sae sounded confused, maybe borderline afraid. It made Minako fear that Akihiko wouldn't be able to make it in time to help them. She would have to make a scene or fight back. But when Akechi started to chuckle darkly, something cold landed in the pit of her stomach.

"I wish someone could take a few pictures right now." The teen's shoulders continued to shake in laughter. She noticed a phone clutched in his hand, but didn't know what it meant. He sure as hell wasn't about to take that picture . "They would make for some wonderful family mementos."

Minako grabbed her head as her stomach turned violently. It was a transition that she was aware of. The phone now made sense.

Akechi had taken them into the Metaverse.

She was an idiot. While running into Sae and Akechi hadn't been completely out of her way, she should have stopped and told Akihiko what was happening instead of running and getting caught, too. The realization they had been kidnapped became more apparent when someone came up behind her, kicked at the back of her knees, and held her hands together behind her back painfully. The only reason she didn't throw up was because she saw her daughter on her knees next to her, struggling to catch her breath.

"Isn't this just wonderful?"

Akechi stood in front of both her and Sae, or at least, she thought it was him. He was dressed in all black. A helmet covered his head. She felt sick again.

The man with the black mask…

It really was Akechi.

Minako turned to look over her shoulder to see who was holding her hands and found the man who had met them at the station. A moment later, he started to grin madly. Minako knew immediately what was happening the second the black clouds of evil energy began to consume him.

A Shadow...

Sure enough, once the darkness cleared, he was no longer a man, but a vile creature. Akechi, however, laughed as he came to stand between Minako and Sae. "I can't wait to see his face when he realizes I have *two* people he was so close to."

Minako told herself to calm down. In retrospect, she should have seen this coming. Akihiko hadn't been freaking out that morning, but he was worried about *something.* When it came to a threat on his family, he often warned them of danger, or told them to *stay home,* but wouldn't say much else so they could still *live.*

She was an idiot. But she was also a mother. She saw Sae with a *criminal* . What mother would have walked away from her daughter when she was talking to a horrible human being?

This wasn't about *them.* This was a trap.

"I'm curious, though," Akechi started again. "Were you some woman he knocked up years ago and you felt obligated to stay with him? Would that be why Sae hates him so much? Because he was a better *man* than he was a *father?* "

She tried to get an idea of how Sae was holding up while Akechi continued to take stabs about her relationship with Akihiko. It broke her heart that she couldn't reach out to her and tell her it would be okay. Sae felt her eyes on her and faced her, but she was *terrified.* Sae shook her head, hoping to calm down, but her shaking form and short breaths only told Minako that she was having a panic attack.

Suddenly, Minako was happy to have caught Sae at the station. If she were here alone…

She had to do something now. It may not have been the smartest thing to do, but she slammed her head into Akechi's knees, almost knocking him off his feet. But it didn't give her the time she wanted to escape. To retaliate, the teen growled at her and grabbed at the back of her hair.

"I would advise you to behave, you bitch."

"What is wrong with you?" came Sae's sharp voice. Minako could hear the fear laced with her words, but she couldn't really blame her. She doubted anything drastic happened when Sae pulled Akechi into the Metaverse the previous day. This was far darker of a world. There was also a growling and unpredictable shadow standing right behind them. How Sae was still *conscious* was a feat in and of itself.

Akechi released her with a snort. "Come now. Don't be like that. I only need to eliminate those who *know* about what I'm doing. You both mean nothing to me. Actually, Sae-san, you've been my biggest supporter. We're a lot alike, you and I." Another laugh. "And I should thank you for helping me eliminate the leader of the Phantom Thieves. Now, you'll be helping me eliminate Sanada, too."

The air around her pushed against her chest to the point she had to focus to draw in a breath. She saw Sae's reaction from the corner of her eyes. Sae was *pissed* , but more than that, betrayed. And that angered Minako more than anything. How dare this little punk try and take out a wonderful kid, thus horrifying her youngest daughter, intentionally *kidnapping* her and her oldest daughter, and then threaten Akihiko's life, again? How dare he!

"This isn't your fault, Sae." Akechi turned to her with a growing smirk. It made her sick.

"I was an idiot." Minako's heart ached hearing Sae's quiet, yet bitter tone. "I knew something was happening, but I was so determined to see it to the end that I ignored *everything! This* is why you asked me to meet you for lunch, and like a fool, I thought nothing of it! ″

She wanted to say something to her, to try and tell her it was okay, everything was going to work out in the end like it always did, but Akechi's damn laugh made her very angry. "Oh, not to worry, Sae-

san, and...Arisato-san, correct?" Minako ignored him, but felt herself glaring. He smirked because of it. "You'll be dead before all of this is over. Dead people have no regrets, am I right?"

Sae leaned over and cursed under her breath, but Minako continued to eye the young man in front of them with *rage* . "You have another thing coming if you think you'll walk away from this."

And that was when Akechi produced a gun. Despite her best efforts, a slight jolt of fear shot up her spine and her back straightened involuntarily. Sae kept muttering curses and ramblings about how this was *her* fault. Minako was going to tell her to *shut up* when Akechi stood right in front of her, lifted his gun, and whipped her on the side of the head.

"Learn to keep your mouth shut, or Sae-san is going to be the only one living when Sanada shows up."

It knocked her over. It hurt like hell. Her ears were ringing. Her head felt like he had split it in two. She could feel the blood dripping from the freshly made wound. She heard Sae's voice calling out to her, but she couldn't make out what she was saying.

"Sanada isn't stupid enough to fall into your trap."

"Oh, this isn't a trap, Sae-san." Akechi's voice was like nails on a chalkboard right now. "He knows where I am and who I'm with. I didn't intend to keep it a secret."

"Then you're a fool."

" *I'm* the fool?" Another laugh. It made her head ring even more. "I mean, sure, in a sense. You masked your care and concern for him rather well. But I know better now. Or I would have ended this game months ago."

"You tried to." Minako opened her eyes, willed the pain to fade away, then added, "You tried to kill him months ago, here, and you failed. Just like you're going to fail now."

Silence fell around them. She couldn't tell if that was because she had a head injury or if it was really that quiet. She confirmed that it

was, in fact, dead silent when she was pulled up to her knees, and something cold pressed up against her forehead. It tilted her face back enough to catch the sight of the gun, Akechi, and the anger boiling in the eyes she could see through his mask.

"I warned you to shut up."

"Akechi, don't."

But she held his stare, even if she was somewhat terrified this maniac was about to kill her in front of her daughter. She would not die showing fear. She had been through enough trauma in her life and never blinked then. It would hopefully piss the hotshot bastard off because he *thrived* off intimidation and power.

"Once I kill you, I'll kill Sae, and Sanada, and I'll find Makoto and kill her, too." The barrel dug deeper into her flesh. She never lost eye contact. "You can all see each other in hell."

She found herself smiling at him. "You're not going to kill me."

She saw it then: the hesitation. The split second of fear and utter shock that she had called him out on his supposed bluff.

And then the rage came back to his features and she knew she had pushed him too far.

"Don't!"

Strangely enough, he didn't pull the trigger. The gun fell back to his side and Minako almost tipped forward in relief. The first breath she took wasn't enough, and a second later, she was choking on air. How the *hell* was she still alive?

The shadow that stood behind her began to growl even louder. Like they were moths to Akechi's evil aura, several more shadows began appearing around them, but Minako couldn't count exactly how many. Her vision blurred, her mind was racing, she was having trouble breathing. She thought she heard Sae scream at the sight of them all as Akechi ordered an attack. The army of shadows were too far away for her to see *what* they were attacking, but if she had to guess based off experience, they were either fighting an invader

or a powerful shadow.

But just as quickly as the monsters had appeared from the abyss, they were gone. Devoured by a brilliant flash of light. It gave her another headache, but when she blinked, she saw it. Clear as day. Emerging from the darkness (or haziness of her mind) like her beacon of hope.

Caesar.

"Kill him."

More shadows filled the space around them to replace the fallen enemies. The demonic swarm of shadows lunged forward. She caught the look on Sae's face as the shadows followed their command and Minako took the chance to move closer to her. "It's okay. Everything is going to be alright. I promise."

"Wh-What…what the h-hell is…is happening?!"

Her head was *pounding* , she was starting to feel nauseous again, but then she heard *his* voice.

"You must think I'm some kind of pathetic weakling if *this* is all you've got for me."

Akihiko came into her range of sight, a cocky look on his face, his right hand pulling at the glove on his left. Several shadows disappeared behind him. For a moment, Minako thought they had been caught in a spell and they had found themselves back in high school fighting in Tartarus. He stood tall, strong, and ready to prove his strength on the battlefield. It brought tears to her eyes.

"Are you alright?"

She locked eyes with him and slowly nodded her head. He may have exuded arrogance he hadn't shown since he was younger in the heat of battle, but she *saw* the fury in his eyes. If she could focus enough, she could have heard it in his tone.

"You idiot!" Sae's shout right next to her hurt her ears. "Why are you here? He's going to kill you!"

"Please," he said with a laugh. Minako could feel Akechi's boiling anger. Akihiko's eyes narrowed at the boy. She could have sworn the ground shook in fear because of the look. "I may have underestimated you, but you'll regret this, Akechi."

No sooner were the words off of his lips did Akechi grab his head and cry out. Suddenly, the shadow that had once been a human grabbed *his* head and gave off a terrifying roar. Minako's heart seized in her chest. She could *feel* its power. There was no way Akihiko could fight like this, not after the hell he had been through the last few months. He wasn't as young as his mind sometimes liked to believe. He wasn't in one hundred percent health. He hadn't been sleeping very well recently, so he was probably running on fumes. How the hell was he going to manage to do the impossible and get all of them out alive?

At the same time, he was their only chance *to* get out alive.

"I need you to trust me, Minako," he said to her, as if reading her mind. Caesar came to stand directly behind him. The sight of the two of them made her numb, in a good way. There was hope. *He* was their hope. The powerful shadow came to block Akihiko from her line of sight, but she still heard him like he was right beside her. "I promised all of you that I would fight. I sure as hell am not about to go out like this against this little shit."

Akechi's shoulders shook. "I'm afraid that's where you're mistaken, Sanada." The teen waved his hand, then pointed his finger back at Akihiko. "You *are* going to die here. *Now* ."

"Aki!"

"Kill him!"

The shadow charged a moment later. Akihiko took a battle-ready stance, knees bent, and fists held right below his chin. His eyes were sharp, focused, ready to take out some of his anger on the nonhuman enemy approaching. His left hand connected with its face, leaned back to avoid its claws, then took a few steps back.

"Caesar."

The lightning was bright and loud, but it served its purpose. The shadow collapsed before them, motionless, defeated. It amazed her, watching him fight like this again (he made it look so easy), and it brought a smile to her face.

It was quickly replaced with a frown when Akechi laughed again. “You haven’t even begun to witness my true power.”

Akechi grabbed his head again and yelled in agony, but then the shadow Akihiko had fought rose up off the ground. Minako could only watch in horror as the being lunged at Akihiko before he could lift his hands to defend himself. He took a slash to the chest and stumbled back, pulling an arm over his body. She opened her mouth to call out to him, to see if he was okay, when he took another fighting stance with a spark of anger in his eyes.

“I’m fine, Minako.” She wouldn’t have believed him had she not heard the tone of his voice. He didn’t appear to be hurt, but she was quite a distance away from him. “This time, I’ll make sure you don’t get back up.”

Minako’s concern over his health began ebbing away the longer Akihiko fought with the shadow. His onslaught of punches kept it on the defensive rather than having a moment to strike back. The few seconds he withdrew to rebalance himself, he was able to maneuver around a counterattack in ways that left him uninjured. Once he landed a solid punch to immobilize the shadow for a half-second, he stepped back and let his persona take care of the rest.

Something warm filled her heart when she heard Akechi grumble incoherently, likely upset watching his strongest weapon disintegrate into black specks. Akihiko was putting up more of a fight than the teen had anticipated. She *almost* called him out on it.

Until she saw Akihiko lean forward and hold himself up with his hands on his knees. He was tired. His chest heaved with exertion. He looked to be in a great deal of pain, either from exhaustion or from a blow from a shadow she hadn’t been able to see.

It did not go unnoticed by Akechi. “Getting a little too old, are we, Sanada?”

Akihiko straightened his back a minute later, tugging on each of his gloves as if insulted at the jab and ready to prove him wrong. “I’m not *that* old.”

There was an edge of cockiness in his voice, but more than that, Minako knew he was at his limit. But…what could she even do to help? Could she reach Mitsuru with her phone? Could she make a quick and surprising attack on Akechi that wouldn’t backfire in her face? She could push herself to her feet and grab Sae, but then what? Run away? Where the hell would she run to? Akechi wasn’t going to give them time to *escape.*

However, she knew that deep down, Akihiko wasn’t going to be able to keep fighting like this for much longer. Akechi seemed to have several tricks up his sleeve, since he didn’t look as worried as he *should* have been. If she could just get Sae out of this place and call up Mitsuru to help her, she could hopefully save Akihiko as well.

If she failed, well, they would all be dead.

Her attention shifted back to Akechi as he cried out in pain, or anger, or whatever he was doing. Another shadow appeared at his side, then a dark energy caused it to transform into something more menacing and powerful. It was similar to how that man who had followed them into the Metaverse had transformed, but Akechi seemed to be making them stronger on his own. How? Was this his true power? Why wasn’t he fighting with his persona?

Akihiko stood ready to fight like he had all the energy in the world. He had an impressive amount of stamina when he was younger, and maybe he still had enough, but he wasn’t in *perfect* condition. He may have also been distracted by *their* safety. Akechi was standing close enough to the both of them that he could lash out and kill her or Sae in a second.

She *had* to do something, and she had to do it *now.*

The shadow charged and Minako quickly pushed herself to her feet. It caught Sae’s attention, but it also caught Akechi’s. To remedy that, she threw her body at the teen and tackled him to the ground. Her eyes then found Sae’s. “Get out of here, Sae. Use your phone

to call Mitsuru. Tell her we're in the twisted world in Shibuya Station. She can help you."

What she *didn't* plan for was Sae to be so damn *stubborn* . "I-I'm not going to *leave* you here!"

"Go now! Akihiko can't keep fighting like this. If you don't go, we're all going to die!"

Sae hesitated, but before she could do anything else, she felt Akechi's arm wrap around her neck as he managed to get out from under her.

"You really like to push your luck, don't you?" He was *pissed* , and it would have been worth it had Sae listened to her and had been able to get out of this world and get help. Akechi reached for his gun and held it back against her head, right under her still bleeding wound.

"I've had enough of you."

Great. So she was going to die. At the hands of a teenage murderer. She would forever scar Sae and Akihiko for as long as they lived, if they lived, too. What would happen to Makoto? Hopefully Ren would take care of her. She was sure he would. He was a good kid.

The gun went off, but she didn't feel any pain. It was weird. Was she dead already? That was a nice way to go. Quick and painless.

"Father!"

Minako soon realized that no, she was not dead, that she was still held in Akechi's grip, and the gun had *not* been aimed at her.

She saw Akihiko, one of his hands clutching his chest from where he had presumably been shot, falling to the ground. Everything around her suddenly grew cold and silent. Akechi kept laughing next to her, a few random shadows encroaching on them, but it was hard to care at that point. She couldn't find the heart to be pissed off when Akihiko was a few meters in front of her *dying* .

"Well, that was easier than I thought." He laughed again, but Minako didn't hear it. "I really wish I could have found out about you all

earlier. It would have saved us so much time trying to keep him quiet."

"Get up!" Was that Sae? Where was she? *"Get up!"*

Her heart lept in her throat as she watched Akihiko try and push himself off the ground. His arms were shaking. He coughed, blood dripping from his mouth, but he couldn't hold himself up for long. He collapsed, but he kept fighting death to get back up, to save *them,* because he was all they had .

But after watching him try for several agonizing minutes, he finally reached his limit and fell back onto the ground, where he stopped moving altogether.

Was this real? It felt like a terrible, horrific nightmare where her body was floating above herself, watching the scene in front of her, unable to scream, or cry, or do *anything.*

"Get up!"

Minako was so numb that even Sae's screams meant nothing to her. Akechi's laughter didn't register with her. Her eyes couldn't leave Akihiko, waiting for the moment to come where he would push himself up off the floor and back to his feet and save the day. He was just resting. He was tired. He didn't die before, and he wasn't about to die now.

But he never moved.

Not once.

She didn't know how long it had been since he had fallen, but it was long enough for her to realize that this was *real* . It wasn't a nightmare. Akechi had shot Akihiko, and her only chance of escape had been *killed* .

The tears finally flooded her eyes as she struggled to pull in air to breathe. Her heart ached painfully. It was the worst feeling she had ever experienced. It was as if half of her body shut down, or someone ripped her in two, because her other half was laying on the ground in a growing pool of blood...

Despite *his* pain, despite knowing his chances of beating the enemy, he was always trying to *protect them* …

He was always strong like that. Even Ren said so himself.

And she was always the weak one.

And now, he was *dead.*

She remembered the first day she met him. How she was immediately struck by his looks, the kindness in his eyes, the confidence in his voice. She remembered the day she saw him after she woke up from her coma, how she had been so angry with him for leaving his friends, but the look on his face had her forgiving him the next second. She remembered that same night, when she let him back into her life, her heart, her bed, how he told her he loved her, and he promised her he would never leave her side again.

She remembered slamming the door behind her years later, furious with him for saying he wanted to marry her under *his* terms. She blocked his number. She burned some of his things she had at her place. She told herself that she would never speak to him again. But she grew sick with sorrow and she was miserable with his absence not even a week later. She ran back to him, into his arms, and he never let her go again.

She remembered the day they were both sitting on the couch, her with a book in her hand, and him occasionally leaning over towards her growing stomach. He always told her he was afraid, that he wouldn't be a good dad, but then he always acted like a child on their birthday, overly excited about something he couldn't hold just yet, and she knew he was going to be fine.

She remembered him throwing a four-year-old Sae over his shoulder, flipping her on the couch as her daughter howled with laughter, and demanded him to " *do it again, Dad!"*

She remembered him spending hours training Makoto how to throw a punch correctly as a child, to which Makoto grew annoyed with him and popped him right in the face, exactly the way he had told her to.

But now…

“One day, you’re going to die. And it’s going to be out there, alone, doing your damn job!”

“I promised Makoto I would keep fighting, and I know I’ve told you the same, but if I had to choose between my life and any one of yours, I would give mine in a heartbeat.”

The tears that fell from her eyes burned her cheeks, but she closed her eyes to remain calm. She had to *think.* She had to *do something.* She knew Akihiko would forgive her for being *weak* if she could just save their daughter. That was all she had to do. She could *do this.*

She *had* to.

…But she was *weak…*

You have to save your daughter!

I...I can’t…

Something cold pressed up against her head sharply enough that Minako snapped back to the present. Sae was screaming on her knees. Akechi wore a smug grin, then had the gall to laugh.

“Do you want me to spare you the pain? Or should I just add to it and kill your daughter first?”

Her stomach twisted to the point she thought she was going to throw up. However, there was no way in hell she would ever be able to face Akihiko again if she let Sae die before her. Or after her. There had to be something she could do.

“At least *you’re* quiet. I’d rather not deal with so much noise.”

When Akechi turned the gun to Sae, Minako realized this was her decisive moment. Akihiko wasn’t going to magically push himself up and jump in to save them. She *had* to do something. If she didn’t, Sae was going to be shot and killed the same way Akihiko was.

Over my dead body.

Suddenly, the world went black and completely still. Minako opened her eyes, thinking it was all an illusion and this was death rearing its ugly face for the final time. She heard a voice, but it was faint. A whisper, a name…

“Minako.”

“A-Aki?”

She turned her head, scanning the darkness for Akihiko, praying to anything that he was alive. But it wasn’t Akihiko who was calling out to her. She almost jumped back at the sight of what stood before her. There was no way. She was dreaming. She had to be. She was probably dead.

“R-R…Ryoji?”

The blue-haired boy looked *exactly* like he had the last time she had seen him years ago. The charming smile he flashed her as he approached almost made her reach out and hug him. Did this mean she was truly dead? Did she somehow give her life for Akihiko’s? How did she get here? Where was Sae? And Akechi?

“You look just as beautiful as the last time I saw you.” He reached forward and grabbed her hand, bringing it to his lips. His hands were cold, but his lips were warm. What the hell was happening?

“A-Am I dead?”

He chuckled at her. “No, my dear. You came here on your own free will.”

“What does that mean?”

“You want to save someone, yes?”

Aki…

Did that even happen? If she woke up, would she be back in bed, curled up against Akihiko like nothing had happened? Like he wasn’t

dead because a crazed *teenager* put a bullet through his heart? Did that mean Sae was okay, too?

She felt both of his hands hold both of hers. She stared back into those deep blue eyes while his smile stretched across his face. “Summon him.”

That knocked her off balance. “I…I can’t.”

He leaned in and kissed the side of her cheek. “You can. You have a reason to.”

Minako shook her head. “You know that I lost that power years ago. I can’t do anything to save him, or my children. We’re all going to die. And when we die, everything Aki has done will be lost.”

Then, a sudden burst of anger flooded her heart as the tears streamed down her face. “He worked so hard for what was right, and he’s *dead!* These men will never pay the price they deserve! They are the ones who should be dead! All of them! I’ll kill every last one of them!”

“Now, now,” he said with a light laugh. “You risked your life to save this world once, Minako. I know what your heart truly wishes.”

He was wrong; she just couldn’t tell him that through her tears.

“Besides, death comes in many forms, my dear. One shouldn’t always be afraid of it.” Ryoji closed the distance between them, forcing Minako to look directly into his eyes. “So let me ask you, which form of Death do you wish to face: the form that fights, or the form that takes away?”

She stumbled over an answer, even if she didn’t really understand him. “I-I…”

He closed his eyes. His smile disappeared. He was serious. “We all fear Death, Minako, but not you. You were never afraid of him. You instead chose to fight with him. Now.” The warm expression she was so used to seeing on his face reappeared. “Summon him, and he will listen.”

And then he was gone just as quickly as he had come. Her eyes shot open to find that nothing had changed around her. She wasn't dreaming. Akihiko was still lifeless on the ground. Sae kept trying to call out to him, each cry growing more and more hysterical. Akechi continued to laugh maniacally and point the gun at her daughter.

"Which form of Death do you wish to face?"

Minako closed her eyes in an effort to focus, to find that special place in her heart that had once allowed her such impressive power. "Please…"

Sae kept shouting at her father. Akechi enjoyed every second. No one had heard her silent plea.

He killed Aki. He's going to kill Sae, then he's going to kill you. Makoto will be next...You have to do this…

"We all fear Death, Minako…"

"I need you…"

"Get up, Akihiko!"

He killed him! He's going to kill your children!

"...But not you. You instead chose to fight with him."

"Not to worry, Sae-san. You'll be joining him soon."

Akechi is the one who deserves to die for what he's taken away from you!

"Summon him, and he will listen."

"Thanatos."

Everything proceeded in slow motion. It was quiet. The color drained from her vision. Her heart stopped beating. For half a second, and with half the mind she had left, she thought *this* was what it was like to *die* .

As long as I take you out with me...

Akechi stopped laughing and grew unusually quiet. His eyes scanned the area, suddenly losing interest in her, or Sae, or even his weapon. His sharp turn of the head brought her mind more into focus. And she was glad. Or she would have been unable to register him releasing her and calling out to his persona. Maybe? Why would he need to do that?

“Loki!”

She saw him then. The coffins. The blue coat. The sword. The skull.

Death .

Kill him...

Akechi’s persona was able to parry the attack that came from the shadows, but Thanatos was much, *much* stronger. With a simple twist of the torso, he flung the smaller persona back into the darkness. The monsters that had come from the abyss all scampered away, not even trying to battle the demonic beast. Akechi watched in awe-struck *horror* as Death turned to face him.

“Wh-What the…the hell?”

Minako took the time to look over to her daughter, who had paled and tried to get as far away from the monsters as possible. “He’s not going to hurt you, Sae.” Minako faced Thanatos again. “He’s with me.” Then she narrowed her eyes at Akechi. “Kill him.”

Thanatos charged at Akechi, but his persona blocked another attack before it could reach the boy. Akechi spun around to face her, his body bristling in anger. He wisely chose not to say anything and took his free second to rush out of sight with a curse on his lips. His persona disappeared before it was slashed with the sword in Thanatos’s hands. It angered her that Akechi would *run away* , and she was about to go after him, until she realized she couldn’t move.

She fell to her knees, unable to catch herself before her head smacked onto the ground. She thought she felt something on her shoulders, but she couldn’t tell. Everything was heavy. Numb. Silent.

“Mom? Mom, are you okay?”

It was hard to catch her breath and she needed air before she suffocated. “S-Sae…”

“W-What...w-what was all of... *that?* ”

She helped Minako sit up, but she was so tired and dead weight to her daughter. She couldn’t stay sitting up on her own, but Sae let her lean against her. “Aki…is…is he okay?”

Oh god, was he dead, or just unconscious? Sae didn’t say anything to her right away, which produced a small amount of fear in her heart. Minako used that to push away from her. She fell back onto the ground, unable to support herself, but her eyes caught Akihiko laying a few meters away. His eyes were closed. He wasn’t moving. He looked kind of peaceful.

That got her to move.

“Aki…” She was half crawling, half pushing herself along the floor so she could get closer to him. It felt like hours before she was able to reach him, and she collapsed onto his shoulder.

“Aki, wake up.”

Nothing.

She found the strength to lift her arms to give him as violent a shake as she could. “Aki…Aki please…”

Her head fell back onto his shoulder. She didn’t try to contain her tears. “Wake up…please…” Was she not loud enough? She couldn’t be any louder. Her throat kept getting tighter and tighter. In another minute, she wouldn’t be able to *breathe.*

Disregarding her body’s cries of pain and exhaustion, Minako grabbed Akihiko’s other shoulder. Her muscles burned as she grit her teeth and rolled him over onto her knees. “Aki. Wake up!”

He remained quiet. Still. Cold. *Dead* .

The blood on his chest and the corners of his mouth were what made her finally realize it was real. Her head fell to his shoulder as she released all the pain and anger into a blood-curling scream. He was *dead.* That feeling from the morning, it was a warning. And she ignored it. She let him walk away from her. She should have called him and told him to come back home. Now, he was gone. He was never coming back to her. He would never have that chance to say goodbye to his own *children!*

No.

She told herself that she could save him, she really could, if she could summon another one of her personas. She already summoned Thanatos. It took most of her energy to call him, but this was Akihiko's *life* . *Her* life. If she saved him, at least enough to bring him back and take him to the hospital, she would accept whatever happened to her.

It had been years since she had called out to any of them, but she had that weird connection with Thanatos that made it feel so natural. Like it was just yesterday that she had last used his strength in battle. It was probably thanks to Ryoji, but she could worry about the *how* later. Who the hell was she going to summon to *heal?* Was *healing* going to be enough? Would she even be able to? Or was Thanatos simply a gift from an old friend with magical powers and a confusing sense of reality?

High Pixie.

She never got the chance to see if it worked.

Her body went limp, and she fell back onto Akihiko as the world faded completely.

Chapter 164

Chapter 164

Why is this happening?

It was all Sae could ask herself as she sat on her knees, her head falling to her chest, feeling lost and helpless. She was so angry with herself for not realizing Akechi's motives in asking for lunch and sushi. She was angry with herself for not grabbing Minako and running away so Akechi didn't have to trap them both. She was angry with herself for just sitting in this damn world, terrified, unable to do *anything* to help…

This had to be the Metaverse Mitsuru had explained to her. The same place where *she* had a shadow born from her desire to win, to be the best, because she *hated* her father…

All for what?

Nothing.

"All this anger, this hatred…One day, you're going to regret it."

She shook off the dread that was starting to take root in her heart and pushed herself to her feet. If she was going to be of any help to her hopefully just unconscious parents, she needed to act quickly. Not only that, she was going to need to know how to get out of this world. While she knew *where* she was, that was it. She didn't see a door, nor had they entered the world through one, but if anyone would know, it would be one of them.

Please don't die yet.

Sae finally managed to find the strength to *move* and was immediately at her mother's side, shaking her gently, then not so gently, to wake her up. "Wake up!"

Nothing she did worked, so she turned her eyes to Akihiko. It was

hard, knowing there was no possible way he was *alive* , but Mitsuru had told her the Metaverse was a very strange place, so maybe there was hope. After all, Amamiya had been shot in this world just last night, and he was alive. And that giant… *monster,* two of them, came to their aid when she was sure Akechi was going to put a bullet through her mother's head.

"A-Akihiko…wake up."

She took a second to wipe at her eyes. If he woke up, *when* he woke up, she didn't want him to know she had been *crying* . "Please…"

He couldn't really be dead, could he? He never died in the past when he was supposed to, when she *expected* him to…

"You're going to regret it."

"Wake. Up!"

No matter how many times she shook his shoulders, nothing changed.

All of her anger suddenly meant *nothing* . This was *her* fault. She may not have agreed with him for choosing to distance himself from his family, but he *tried* to have a relationship with her. He *kept trying* , even after she screamed at him, threatened him, *arrested* him, watched her team beat him half to death…

Her head fell to his shoulder, and for the first time since she could remember, she *sobbed* . He was gone. Forever. She would never be able to tell him that she was sorry, to tell him she should have spoken to him more, to tell him she was willing to move on. She would have been willing to forgive him. She wanted to give him a chance to be a *father* again.

More than anything, she wanted him to tell her that he loved her.

But just like that, she would never get that chance again.

The memories came to her mind before she could even stop them. He was the one who taught her how to read, how to throw a proper

punch, how to treat small cuts and the like. (She had to when Makoto got into the knife drawer as a toddler and sliced her palm open. Akihiko said it would be smart for her to learn basic first aid after that.) He would always compete with her; from who could scare who the most in one week, to who could earn the most “thank you’s” from Minako and Makoto, to who could put Makoto to bed the fastest when she needed a nap.

But then she started to notice the wall, the distance he was putting between the two of them, and her curiosity turned to bitterness. At first, *she* thought she did something wrong, even when in the comfort of their own living room, he was perfectly normal.

Then he missed her first aikido match. And the next. He never showed up to any of them.

That had been when she brought up her question about their different last name.

That was when she started to hate him.

“I don’t want to have a criminal find you when he looks into me. This is all I can do to keep you and your sister safe.”

Even through all her anger throughout the years that followed, he still *tried* . He still tried to make her happy for her birthday, or Christmas, or when she was sick. He seemed to care more about her than her mother did, but she had been far too consumed by rage at that point to notice.

There came a time when he stopped fighting back. The day she hoped he would *die* for letting that doped up teenage thief steal her homework, rough her up a little, and not face justice. He gave her too much space after that. He avoided her at every turn. Instead, he focused his attention on Makoto, who was a lively ball of energy that annoyed the hell out of her most days. She was too happy, too carefree, too *forgiving* of a man who *hated* them, who *betrayed* them.

“Why do you hate Dad?”

“You should hate him, too.”

“But I love Dad.”

“You’ll hate him one day, Makoto.”

“No, I’ll always love Dad.”

Sae envied her sister more often than she would admit, but right now, she wished she could have been more like her. More understanding. More able to accept the positive rather than the negative. More willing to put her anger aside so she *could* have that relationship with their father.

Maybe then she could have asked him *why* he betrayed her instead of finding out years later from her mother…

She regretted everything, just like Minako always warned her she would.

“I’m so sorry,” she cried, knowing he wasn’t going to hear her anyway, but feeling slightly less *sick* because it was off her chest. She didn’t know what else to say. How the hell was she supposed to put all of her feelings into words when she was never good at it anyway? She had years of questions and suppressed feelings she wanted to tell him. He had been her rock, even when she didn’t want to admit it, when her life had been falling apart recently. He helped her understand the disgusting world they both worked in. He saved her from becoming a pawn in a criminal mastermind’s game. She would have been *killed* once she had done enough for them, and he not only reached out to her, but made her *see* that.

He was a great father, someone who never gave up on her, and continued to teach her and raise her despite her shortcomings.

How did someone say they were *sorry* to a man who died to *protect* someone like *her?*

Sae screamed when she felt a *buzz* by her hand. A phone. It was a phone. Suddenly desperate to get her parents out of this world, she searched for the source, finding the phone in Akihiko’s jacket. The phone fell silent, and her heart dropped into her stomach. It was her

last ray of hope to escape, get her mother at least to a hospital, have a *doctor* tell her that Akihiko was dead, and check on her sister.

It went off again, startling her to the point she dropped it. When it was in her hand again, she flipped it open with shaky fingers, willing her words to come out of her throat. “H-Hello?”

It was a stupid thing to say. She needed *help.* She had no idea how his phone was working when she was sure they were in a different world, but it made her feel more disgusted with herself for not even trying…

“Sae?”

She recognized Mitsuru’s voice on the other end, and she held onto the phone with all her strength. She didn’t know how it was possible to talk to her, but she wouldn’t waste the chance. “We-We’re in that world! M-Minako. I-I think she’s unconscious. B-But…But Akihiko… H-He’s…He’s…”

The words wouldn’t come out of her mouth before she started to sob again. “Sae. I’m sending someone to come get you. Please stay where you are. Stay on the line with me. They should be there soon.”

She heard her voice, understood some of the words, but it wouldn’t change what was already done. Akihiko was dead. Minako was either dead or barely hanging on. And someone was coming to get them out? Would it help her wake up from this nightmare? Would she be able to have just *one* chance to tell her father how sorry she was…

“Sae, are your parents okay?”

The pain of having to say *no* gripped at her heart and ripped it right out of her chest. “H-He’s…He’s *dead…”* Racked with guilt, she grabbed a fistful of hair that fell around her face. “He’s *dead!”*

Mitsuru either lost the connection or had nothing to say, or didn’t believe her. Sae kept saying it, over and over, a pitiful reminder to

herself that he was gone, she would never see him again, he would never speak to her again.

“Is Minako okay?”

“I-I don’t…I don’t know…”

“Stay with me, Sae. Ken and Junpei are almost there.”

But they wouldn’t be enough to save Akihiko, would they?

No. Because this is your *fault…*

If only she hadn’t been so angry to see how much he was really suffering. The small acts of kindness he had shown her in the past year and she gave him the cold shoulder, he tried to pretend he wasn’t hurt by it. The time he found her after Shido had met with her and he held her for the first time since she was little, she should have noticed *then.*

“Sis, Dad loves you. And I think he loves you more than me. I’m sorry you had to sacrifice so much for my sake, but I hope you know that Dad would do so much for you if you allowed him to.”

“No matter what happens, Sae, I promise *I will protect you.”*

And now you’re dead!

“Sae.”

She felt a hand on her shoulder. Her first reaction was to scream. The phone fell from her hands. She whipped around fast enough that she lost her balance. Someone held her steady. “It’s okay. You’re okay. We’re taking you out of here.”

It was the driver from the day before. Ken, if she remembered correctly. There was another man with him she didn’t know. His attention was focused on her parents. “Fuck, man. We gotta get out of here.”

Ken must have seen the phone laying behind her and swiped it off the ground. “Mitsuru?”

Her eyes landed back on her mother, then her father, then up to the man trying to pick Akihiko up. “I-Is he…Is he dead?”

She didn’t know the man well enough to know if the look in his eyes was normal, or if it was him trying not to break the news to her. “It’s hard to tell here. We’re not safe. We got to go.”

“We’re going to need a doctor.”

“I’ll meet with you at the hospital.”

Ken flipped the phone shut, then he moved to help the other man with her parents. “Are you going to be okay to follow after us?”

All she could do was nod her head and try to clear her eyes. This was a time to be *helpful* . If her parents had any chance at surviving, she couldn’t waste a second on *tears* .

“Brace yourself.”

The world warped like it had when Akechi pulled her into it, and she thought she was going to be sick. When she opened her eyes, the nausea passed and was replaced with confusion. They were in one of the halls at the train station. Not the same one she had met Akechi at, but it was oddly desolate. In a city the size of Tokyo and a station the size of Shibuya (was that where they were now?), it baffled her.

However, her next thoughts went to her parents. Minako was still passed out in Ken’s arms. Akihiko was out as well, looking like he was *dead.*

This had better be one hell of a nightmare, and she would wake up soon, still hating Akihiko and holding a grudge against Minako and Makoto and *everything was okay* so she could tell them all how sorry she was…

She put her fingers against Akihiko’s neck, pressing almost *too* hard to find a pulse. She turned to do the same to Minako. Her eyes closed to help her better focus. There was a *thump* in both of her fingers, but she couldn’t tell if she was willing it to be there or if it was her own pulse. In her state of shock, she assumed it was her

imagination, but that feeling gave her comfort, and she clung to it.

Please…

“Sae.”

Please don’t leave me.

“We need to go. Now.”

Not like this…

Someone grabbed her by her shoulders and shook her *hard* . “Snap out of it. It’s alright. We’re gonna get them out of here.”

“Goddamn he’s heavy!”

“Sae!”

The world came back into focus. There was a woman standing in front of her, hands on her shoulders and shaking her occasionally. It was the same person that helped her carry Amamiya out of the police station.

Where were all of you when my father needed you?!

Ken shifted her mother’s body on his back. “C’mon, we need to get moving.” He turned back to her. “Are you going to be okay following us?”

Yukari, if she remembered her name right, grabbed her arm and began pulling her after the two men. As she tried to force herself to keep up, her heart continued to beat madly in her chest. Would she ever speak to her parents again? Would she ever get to tell them she was sorry? What would happen to her sister? What would Makoto even *do* right now if she called her to tell her what happened?

She threw herself into the car waiting at the curb, curious to know why they weren’t in an ambulance, but she never voiced her thought. Instead, she grabbed each of her parents’ wrist and tried to find that pulse point she thought she had felt before. With the

bounce of the car and her own heartbeat, it was hard to convince herself there was a pulse in either of them. Akihiko had a damn hole in his chest. There was no way he was alive. There was *no way…*

Sae didn't follow them into the hospital when they arrived, too horrified and in shock to get out of the car. A female voice asked her if she was okay and if she needed to get checked out, too. She didn't think she was physically hurt. She just wanted someone to save her parents. She prayed for that miracle. She would have been willing to go back in time and accept everything her father had done with just as much love and pride as Makoto had…

… *Makoto!*

Was she okay?

Had she been kidnapped by someone else?

Had Akechi tried to kill her, too?!

Despite her wishes to find her sister, Yukari grabbed her by her wrists. "It's okay, Sae. Your sister is with friends. We have a few of our friends making sure that they are all okay. She's fine. Right now, we need to get you looked at to make sure you're okay."

The tears began to blur her vision again. Her throat tightened with dread. "H-He's…He's d-dead…"

Yukari wrapped an arm over her shoulder to get her out of the car. The cold air struck her like a lightning bolt. Like that being that fought with her father… Why didn't that thing save him?

"Your father has always been impossible," Sae heard Yukari say. "I can't imagine what you went through, but if there's a chance he's alive, he's going to be okay. Don't give up on him yet."

She snarled at the woman and pulled away. "He *shot* him! He's *dead! He's dead!*"

"Sae."

Mitsuru came up right next to her, and she lost the rest of her

strength. She fell into the closest seat she could like dead weight, her hands rising to cover her face. It was then that she realized she was shaking again. She was cold, and terrified, and facing the looming reality that her father was *dead…*

The last time she was shivering like this, he had been there. He had given her his jacket, told her to go home and sleep. Then got himself kidnapped, trying to protect *her.*

She had realized the next day, after screaming at her mother and throwing his damn jacket away, that it had been his birthday.

She cried loudly into her hands. Her dad was dead. Her mom was probably dead. Her sister could be the next target, and they would probably kill her. Regardless of what she always wanted to believe, Akihiko had been the one to sense danger and save them. And now he was *dead.* They would all be shortly to follow...

“Sae.”

Her hands were forced off of her face, and she saw Mitsuru kneeling down in front of her. “I-I…”

“It’s okay,” she whispered as she put a hand on her knee. “You’re going to be okay.”

“H-How…How can you say that…”

A small, sad smile stretched over her lips. “You’re alive. You’re a valuable witness. Your father wouldn’t have it any other way.”

She snapped again. “He *killed* him. I saw it! He *killed* him! He’s *dead!* ”

The smile, as weak as it was, disappeared. Mitsuru moved to sit in the seat next to her. “Sae, I need you to calm down. Tell me what happened, the best way you can.”

Her hands covered her face again. “He killed him. There were all these monsters. Akechi shot him. He *shot him!* Then another monster came out of nowhere. It saved my mother. Nothing saved my father! I don’t know. *I don’t know!”*

Mitsuru put a hand on her forearm. “It’s okay. You’ve witnessed firsthand something I would never wish upon anyone. I know it’s hard to comprehend, but please believe me when I tell you that everything will be okay.”

Sae started to choke on her breath. “He *killed* him. How can you tell me everything will be *okay?”*

Mitsuru was quiet for a few seconds, but her hand remained on her arm. “I know this is difficult for you, and I’m sorry. We believe your mother lost consciousness from shock and exhaustion, and she will recover with time. Please...Hang in there.”

It was ludicrous. Her father was dead. Her mother did something, and now she was dead. With Akihiko gone, the police would fall apart and the criminals would destroy everything he fought for. And what about her sister? What could she do for Makoto besides tell her the truth? Would she still want to follow in her father’s footsteps after all the hell it brought him? Where was *his* justice going to be?!

“Can you tell me what happened?”

Mitsuru’s voice helped her to calm down enough to try and *think.* Either that, or her body was finally coming to terms with the situation and there was nothing else she could do. “I...Akechi...he asked to go to lunch. I met him at the station. Mom found me there, and then he said something to take us to that other world. T-There were a lot of monsters,” she started, taking a deep inhale to keep her voice low. If she wanted justice for what Akechi did to her father, she had to talk to someone she could trust. Mitsuru would see to it that he paid the price.

“They kept attacking Akihiko, but…he beat a majority of them. There was one with him? It produced lightning. There was one with Akechi…H-He appeared after…after he…he shot Akihiko. But then there was one that came out of nowhere and attacked the one with Akechi…”

She felt Mitsuru’s hand jerk away for a second, but then she placed it back on her arm. “Can you describe it?”

It was *terrifying* . Sae would never forget that demonic creature for as long as she lived. “It was black. Blue. The face of a skull. There were coffins surrounding its body…I-I thought it was...it was going to kill me...”

Mitsuru fell silent. When she was quiet for too long, Sae tightened her hands at her side and shot her a glare. “I’m not making this up!”

Their eyes met. She could tell Mitsuru believed her, but… “I can’t believe this…”

“I’m not crazy!”

Mitsuru’s eyes fell to the floor by their feet. “N-No, you misunderstand. I’m sorry…I just…”

Sae began to grow more and more interested in what Mitsuru was having difficulty finding words for. Did *she* know where it came from? Did she know why it was there?

“I know I’ve told you this before, but your parents fought with personas in a demented world like the one you were in. Your father, as well as our team, have managed to keep that power with us, and we’ve used it recently in the Metaverse. However, your mother lost her connection with them years ago. But, the being you described, it was one of hers.” Mitsuru’s eyes hardened as she faced her again. “Was there anything else that you can recall that struck you as abnormal?”

Sae leaned back in surprise, but took a moment to *think.* She didn’t see a physical body like that being that attacked Akechi’s persona, but she did see a light. A glow that surrounded both of her parents. It was weird, but given the rest of the day’s events, it wasn’t anything she thought drastic.

“N-No...I-I don’t think...so...”

The way Mitsuru placed a soft hand on her shoulder almost made her cry. “I know this is difficult for you, but Akihiko knew you were in danger. I told him to wait for help, but he would never let anything hurt you. If you are to blame anyone for what has happened, you

can blame me. If I were to have been a few minutes earlier, I could have saved him..."

The air left her lungs in one mad rush. The action caused her to lean forward and her head landed on Mitsuru's shoulders. Did Sae blame Mitsuru for her father's death? No. She blamed herself. *She* was the one who blindly waltzed into Akechi's trap. *She* was the one who cowered like a child terrified of the dark and the monsters. *She* was the one that had *years* to reach an understanding with Akihiko, and she chose not to. Now, a *bullet* had gone through his heart. He was *dead.* She had to accept it.

Which meant she would have to break the news to her sister. If she was going to hear it from anyone, she wanted Makoto to know from her. If she waited too long, hoping for the miracle that was impossible, Makoto could find out from Akechi, or the news, and Sae wouldn't have that. The sooner it was out in the open, the quicker Sae could get to work on nailing Akechi to the cross. To do that, she needed her sister's help and support, and to know she was staying out of trouble herself.

"I-I have to tell...to tell Makoto…"

Sae fumbled around for her phone when Mitsuru leaned back and then immediately found Makoto's contact information. Her sister didn't pick up the first time. Or the second. Sae was on her feet and almost tearing down the sliding glass door when Makoto *finally* answered her phone. "S-Sis?"

A powerful sigh of relief escaped her lips, and along with it, the fear that Akechi had gotten to her first. "Oh thank god. Where are you?"

"I-Is everything okay?"

"Where are you?"

Her sister was quiet, perhaps intimidated, but she thankfully answered her back. "Um, I'm…with a friend."

Right. Mitsuru had said something the night before about Makoto volunteering to take care of Amamiya while he was recovering. In

retrospect, she should have told her *no,* but at this point in time, it saved her life. She wasn't alone. And she would be in good company when she tore her sister's heart into shreds.

"I need to speak to you."

"Oh." There were noises in the background, but they were faint, and Sae couldn't make out what they were. "Um…"

"Just…stay where you are. I'll meet you at Leblanc."

Since that was where Amamiya lived, she assumed that was where Makoto was. It would be easier for her to stay where she was to help make it look natural when she met with her. And to be with someone who could help comfort her…

"Oh! Um, okay. I'll uh, see you soon?"

Sae let her know she was on the way, then ended the call. She inhaled deeply, a light wave of dizziness hitting her, but then she turned to Mitsuru as she released her breath.

"I have to tell my sister about what has happened. I don't want any of these supposed enemies to see me here. But…" Her eyes dropped and her hands clenched tightly at her sides. "Please tell me when my mother wakes up."

Mitsuru offered her a subtle nod. "Do not feel like you have to shoulder everything on your own, Sae. If you need me, for anything, you just need to ask. I'll always be available for you and your sister."

Sae ran a hand under her eyes, muttered a quiet, "Thank you," then she turned on her heels and walked out of the hospital. A fresh wave of tears started to line her vision, but she knew better than to show up at Leblanc crying. She had to be strong for her sister. For the time being, she was all Makoto had.

Makoto was all *she* had.

It would be hard. Makoto was extremely close to Akihiko. Makoto always talked about how much she loved him, how much she wanted to grow up and follow in his footsteps, how much she

wanted to make the world a better place *with* him. It was a mentality that drove Sae insane, failing to grasp how Makoto could understand her anger, but love their father at the same time. It was now a trait she wished she had…

But if anything, Sae had earned Akihiko's trust over the last few weeks. He knew what she was capable of. He wouldn't have given her a sense of direction if it would have led her astray. She may not be able to talk with him now, to help him throw Akechi, and Shido, and the hundreds of others behind bars, but she would *never* let his fight die in some demented world. She would gather everything she had learned, find everything Akihiko had uncovered, and then she would do what she did best.

She would get justice.

Chapter 165

Chapter 165

And this is where I am going to end for the weekend. Even if I know some people have read the next few chapters.

At first, Makoto was beyond eager to see Ren again, feeling like she hadn't seen him in *months.*

When she walked (ran really) up the stairs to his second-floor room and *saw* him, her heart came to a powerful stop. Ren was never one to look visually chipper or excited, but there was a sense of *loss* seeing him now. He was laying on his back on his bed, eyes shut either in pain or from a nightmare, his arms outside of the blankets wrapped in bandages. The closer she got to him, the more she began to see the bruises on his face, his wrists, his neck, and she started to feel like a terrible human being for being so excited moments ago.

Morgana was curled up in a ball on the windowsill by Ren's bed, but his ears perked up when he heard her approaching. "It's good to see you!"

She thought Morgana would have told her to get lost or tell her Ren was in serious pain and there was nothing they could do, so the pep in his voice made her heart lighter. He hopped off his spot to the floor, then trotted up to her feet.

"He's been in and out of sleep for hours. Takemi gave him some medication for the pain, but there's little she can do for the nightmares."

Her eyes began to burn as she carefully maneuvered around Morgana to stand by Ren's bedside. His lips were parted and she

could hear his erratic breaths. There was a thin line of sweat on his forehead where his hair was matted to his face. A bandage covered his right cheek, but it didn't hide much of the bruise. She bravely reached out to brush some of his hair off his face, but as soon as she touched him, his eyes shot open.

She reeled back, but quickly pressed against his shoulder to keep him from sitting up. "It's okay, Ren. It's just me."

His eyes were naturally dark, but there had always been some sort of *life* to them. Whether it was the sparkle in his eyes when he saw her from across the hall at school, or the spark of arrogance when he defeated an enemy she told him not to take on alone. Seeing them so devoid of anything made it hard to look at him and remain strong herself.

But she had to. Because he had been strong enough to suffer through this. He didn't deserve her fear, her pity, in a time when he was afraid.

It didn't take him long to notice her, realize who she was, and some flare of life came to his eyes. Ren lifted an arm and easily found her hand, and while the smile he flashed her was forced, it was better than nothing.

"I missed you."

Makoto dropped to her knees to be in his line of sight, holding onto his hand with all her strength to keep herself composed. "H-How are you feeling?"

She thought she felt him squeeze her hand weakly. "I am so much better now…that you're here."

She wasn't a doctor, and she couldn't magically make his injuries go away, but if he told her to stay because it made him feel better, she would. She would never leave his side unless he told her to. "Is there anything I can get you?"

His other hand came across his body, pointing a finger to his lips. At first, she thought he was thinking of something, until that smile

turned into something that was more *Ren,* and she felt her face start to burn.

“O-Oh!” She kissed him lightly, afraid that she would hurt him. When she pulled away, he breathed out a laugh. It made her unsure of what she should do next. Did he need water or something? More medicine? Maybe she shouldn’t have come over so he could have slept…

“Makoto.” Her spine straightened when he said her name with a sternness she wasn’t expecting, but he was still grinning madly at her. All he did when he had her attention was tap his finger on his lips again, and she wouldn’t deny his requests, even if she knew it wouldn’t help.

She kissed his lips a few more times, his nose, the bruises on his face. It wasn’t until he started shifting on the bed that she thought he was hurting, so she came to her feet to help him sit up against the wall. She watched him wince in pain for a minute or two, but all the while, he refused to let go of her hand. She likely would have bolted for the stairwell if he hadn’t. Seeing him hurting over something as simple as *sitting up* broke her heart.

“W-Will you sit next to me?”

Makoto didn’t think it was a good idea, since she was likely to hurt him, and he must have caught the hesitation in her eyes. “Please? I had to go all night without seeing you. I was miserable all night.” He lifted his free hand to cough once. “I really do feel so much better with you here.”

If only he could have sounded better. His voice was raspy. He was still breathing unevenly. The slightest of movements made him tense and grit his teeth… “Let me get you some more medicine.”

But he pulled on her arm with more strength than she thought he would have in his condition. It caught her off guard and she lost her footing, luckily catching herself on the edge of the bed before she fell on top of him. He didn’t give her time to jump off and grabbed her around the waist and leaned into her side. He was acting like a little kid, but it was cute. It made her laugh. And if it made him

happy, then she would let him do whatever he wanted.

She situated herself against the wall while Ren got more comfortable against her. Sadly, once he stopped moving around, she grew anxious. The silence was awkward, but she thought it was for the best in case Ren wanted to sleep. Her arms remained at her side, too afraid to touch him and hurt him.

“You don’t need to be afraid, Makoto.”

It took more strength than she thought to keep herself from crying. “I-I’m sorry.”

“Do you know what really calms me down?”

She laughed to cover up her whimpers. “I already gave you plenty of kisses, Ren.”

“I can never have too many kisses.” He sounded so playful, so content, like he was perfectly fine. Or forcing it to make *her* feel better. “I really like when you play with my hair.”

It took her half a second to let his comment sink in, then another half a second to realize it was an invitation. It was one that calmed her down, too. “It’s really soft.”

His body shook with mild laughter as her fingers began to stroke through his hair. It was just as soft as it had been before, which she was thankful for. If he still had the blood and knots in his hair she saw the night prior, she would have lost her composure. She did start to notice that the longer she brushed his hair, the more his breathing started to even out, and the more he started to relax. If only she could kiss away his pain and bring him uninterrupted sleep…

The peace that surrounded them was wonderful. Her mind remained focused on how Ren’s hair was surprisingly long and thick, but warm and soft. She counted his breaths as his chest was rising and falling against her side. There came a point in time that she was sure he was asleep. He felt like dead weight, but she didn’t mind. It actually made her happy to know he was resting, hopefully free of pain and

nightmares.

Morgana walked up to the edge of the bed. “His medication is in his desk. He hasn’t eaten all day, but Boss said he would have something for him. But,” Morgana added as he placed his front paws on the bed. “I think he’s out.”

And she hoped to keep him out for as long as he was at peace. She thought that after several minutes, she would get bored, or want to get up, but she never did. She enjoyed listening to his breathing, feeling the faint heartbeat, the feeling of his hair. It actually made her tired, too, and she had slept fairly well that night.

In fact, she was sure she dozed off for at least an hour, or two. When she shook herself awake, Ren was still tucked under her arm, asleep. Morgana had returned to his spot in the window, the sunlight reflecting off his fur. She refused to get up unless Ren was having a nightmare or she knew he was awake, but she was starting to get hungry. The smell of curry and coffee from below made her even more so. If only she could reach her bag with her phone, she would be able to text Futaba and have her help out, or snack on the food she had packed for herself and Ren.

It took another hour before Ren started to stir in her arms. Her hand was still buried in his hair, but she had long stopped moving it. Ren must have noticed, and she felt terrible. He couldn’t have gotten all the sleep he needed just now. He should have slept for *hours.* She could starve herself for one day. He had given her and her family *life* again.

“It’s okay, Ren.” She returned to combing her fingers through his hair, but it was too late to try and work that magic again.

Until he shifted to be able to face her, eyes clear of any sort of pain or haziness, and he leaned in to kiss her before she even knew what he was doing. His hand came to the side of her face, his fingers brushing through the fringes of her hair. His grip was powerful, forcing her more into him, and she was swept up by the current he was controlling.

Things became a little *too* heated. Makoto knew he was hurt, but he

seemed so desperate from the way he was kissing her. His other hand moved down the side of her body, leaving a trail of fire in its wake, but that little voice in the back of her head screamed at her to stop him.

So she did, with a gentle push to his chest that hopefully didn't hurt. "Ren, stop. You're hurt."

His reaction tore her to pieces. She saw the thin veil of tears in his eyes as he kept his head against hers. "I thought I was never going to see you again. I was never going to grow up. I was never going to make amends with my parents." His voice was shaky. *He* was shaking. But she couldn't look away from him. "I close my eyes and I see nothing. I can't scream. I can't move. I can't do anything. I'm in so much pain that it hurts to *breathe."*

The tears on his cheeks finally forced her to look away. A second later, both his hands cupped her face and brought her eyes back to him. "Having you here now, it's like I know I'm alive. I know the pain will heal. I know that I have someone who will help me when I'm scared out of my mind."

She did her best to smile through her own tears, but the effort was enough for Ren. Without another word, she let him kiss her again. This time, she shut the voice down in her head, willing to show him that she wasn't afraid of his bruises, his scars, his pain, everything that now made him who he was. He was alive. He had come back to her. And she would do everything she could to make sure he didn't have to suffer like this again.

It didn't take long for Ren to help her down off the wall and onto her back as he leaned over her. His kisses weren't rough or rushed or anything, but loving and sweet. In a way, he was taking his time to memorize her, which made her heart hurt, but it also made her happy. He could close his eyes and see *her* instead of the darkness.

One hand held him up at the side of her head and the other roamed slowly over the rest of her body. Whatever he was doing, she tried to do the same, just with a softer touch. She tried not to think about the bandages she could feel on his chest, his shoulders, his back, and tried to reach him with her touch alone. To let him know she was

there, that his injuries weren't scaring her away, that she was so happy he was back with her again.

Ren's strength finally hit a wall and he collapsed on top of her. He fought to catch his breath, whispering a weak apology in her ear, but she wrapped her arms around him and told him it was okay.

"You're back, Ren," she said when he tried to push himself back on top of her. "There's plenty of time in our future now. You don't need to rush this. I'm not going anywhere."

Her hands returned to his hair, and that zapped him of any energy to fight back. While he was relatively heavy, he wasn't crushing her, and she didn't want him to move unless he had to. She let him lay on her, feeling his lips at the junction of her jaw and her neck, a sign he was awake and *him.*

She swatted at him (carefully) when she felt his hand slide under her shirt. He chuckled against her skin, but he didn't apologize or remove his hand. She allowed him to keep it where it was, so long as he didn't go any higher, but she couldn't deny the way his touch was making her feel.

And a few minutes later, Ren's lips found hers again, and she couldn't keep him off of her for a *third* time. He shifted around until he pushed himself back on top of her. When she opened her mouth to protest, or to even offer to switch places with him, he swallowed her words with his mouth. She fought back that voice in her head reminding her that he was hurt, but if he wanted this, and it brought some life into his eyes again, she wouldn't stop him.

They had both successfully managed to peel off the other's shirt when a loud *buzz* pulled her out of the haze that was him. It was her phone, but she was with Ren. Everyone knew that. If it was important, they would leave a message. Besides, Ren didn't really give her the time to wonder who it could have been and continued to leave kisses all along her face, her neck, her shoulders.

The buzzing didn't stop. Makoto groaned, but she wrapped her arms around Ren's neck when he pulled away from her. "They can wait."

He smiled, and the sparkle in his eyes made her grow far too warm underneath him. “I thought we had plenty of time in our future?”

Makoto almost smacked him in the shoulder. Instead, she crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him. “Fine. Get up so I can answer it.”

Ren’s eyes became slightly dark, but it wasn’t intimidating. His hands pushed her down further into the bed. “They can wait.”

The kiss that followed was much more hungry and needy. His hands moved from her shoulders down to her waist, where his fingers fumbled over her belt. He groaned in annoyance, which she found amusing in some ways. For someone who always kept his composure, he sure liked to lose that skill around her.

He was able to get it off of her, and her phone rang again. A cold chill shot up her spine and pierced her heart when Ren pulled away completely, sitting back on his knees with a weak smile on his face.

“You should probably get that.”

Makoto was furious, and slightly relieved, since she understood exactly where her and Ren’s actions had been leading them. She moved around on the bed to grab her phone sitting on his desk, ready to call the person back and yell at them for ruining her moment with Ren. It went off in her hand, and that was when her heart sank into her stomach.

It was Sae.

Rarely did she ever get a call from her sister. A text here and there, but never a call. It snapped her back to attention, remembering that they still had an enemy to deal with. With her sister aware of everything now, she could have valuable insight. Maybe something had happened and now she was reaching out to her.

Makoto slid her finger over her phone to answer. “S-Sis?”

Sae heaved a sigh over the phone. It was very uncharacteristic of her, even more so than her trying to call her over and over... “Oh thank god. Where are you?”

It was strange to hear any degree of worry or panic from her sister. She was sure Ren was able to pick up on the tension building in her shoulders. “I-Is everything okay?”

“Where are you?”

Oh no. She was going to be mad. She hadn’t told Sae that she was dating Ren, even if she assumed Sae knew. Was she angry because she wasn’t at home when everyone needed to stay on guard? But, her mother was home…right? Why wouldn’t she have told Sae where she was? “Um, I’m…with a friend.”

“I need to speak to you.”

Sae’s rapid-fire responses were a sign that she was likely upset. Why, Makoto didn’t want to ask. “Oh.” What was she going to tell her? Was it about Akechi? Ren came up to sit next to her, confusion on his face as he whispered if she was okay. “Um…”

“Just…stay where you are. I’ll meet you at Leblanc.”

Makoto almost dropped her phone. How did Sae know where she was? Had her mom told her? Did she guess? Why did she need to speak to her in person? If it was a new development, she could have gone to their dad, or Mitsuru…

Was Sae still too afraid of their dad and wanted her to relay the message? Then, why not do it over the phone? But if Sae was one thing, it was stubborn. Makoto knew better than to try and convince her to talk to her over the phone instead. “Oh! Um, okay. I’ll uh, see you soon?”

The click of the phone line left her in a state of panic. Why did Sae need to speak to her? Alone? Was she angry at her, or eager to tell her some news? Her sister wasn’t known to react so hastily, but that was all Makoto could picture based off the sound of her voice. The last time she could remember Sae rushing off into anything was back when that cop tried to arrest her at school.

…Was *she* in danger? Or had there been another threat on her life? She wouldn’t doubt it, since it would only be a matter of time before

Akechi sent his people after the rest of them. Had he told Sae that? Would he really be so bold to tell her own sister that he wanted her dead?

“Makoto.”

She jerked back at Ren’s tone, but then she exhaled a sigh. “S-Sorry.”

“Is everything okay?”

Makoto shook her head, trying to dispel the dread that was beginning to weigh down on her chest. “My sister…she said she had to talk to me.”

“About what?”

“I-I don’t know.” Her hands wrapped around her phone, suddenly feeling anxious. “She never acts like this. I-I think something is wrong…”

Ren’s hands covered her own. “If it was bad, she would have told you over the phone.” Would she have? She never told her anything *good* over the phone either…

He tried a different approach. “She works with Akechi. He likely said something to her and now she’s coming to you for support.”

That had to be it. But Akechi wouldn’t *tell* Sae that he was going to hunt down her little sister. Unless she heard about it in passing. That would explain why she sounded so desperate on the phone. And why she didn’t want her to leave.

Ren pulled her back into his arms, and for a few minutes, she tried to find that peace she had felt before Sae’s call. He rubbed his hands over her shoulder and left soft kisses in her hair. “You can have her come up here, if that makes you feel more comfortable. We can all help out.”

Having Ren with her would either make her more nervous or more relaxed. Sae didn’t officially *know* , but she had to know that she was with him. And Ren was still their leader, just in hiding. It

wouldn't feel right to hold a discussion about a lead or a threat without him. They could fill everyone else in later that night when they all met back up. She didn't think Sae would appreciate her telling her to *wait* for everyone to get together .

Makoto eventually pulled herself away from Ren. "I should head downstairs."

Ren looked so heartbroken, since he knew he couldn't offer to wait with her, so she leaned in to place a kiss on his head. "I-I'll bring her up, i-if that's…o-okay."

He smiled at her, warming her heart up ever so slightly. "She's had plenty of chances to kill me, and I'd rather her not see you like this or she *will* kill me."

She wanted to smack him, but then she understood what he was trying to say. He chuckled at her as she swiped her shirt off the floor, buttoned it up as quickly as she could, then she left him with a small glare he seemed to thoroughly enjoy. Once she was down in the café, she took a seat at the first barstool, that burning in her heart hitting a brick wall. The pleasant aromas of the coffee and curry that made her so hungry over an hour ago were now making her *sick.* Sojiro walked over to her with his brows drawn together in worry, but she was quick to put his concerns to rest.

"He's fine. I-I'm…I'm actually waiting for my sister…"

Sojiro sighed softly, and Makoto hoped he wasn't offended that Sae would be in his shop again. "You're shaking, kid."

Makoto clenched her hands on her lap. "She just…she said she had something to tell me, and now I'm really scared…"

"You're safe here, Niijima," he whispered as he leaned into the counter. "I may not be a fighter, but I know how to get the wrong people to leave."

He was trying to comfort her, and she greatly appreciated it. "Th-Thank you."

Sojiro moved about in front of her, saying nothing, but she watched

him work the coffee maker. It was an interesting machine, very different from the one she was used to, but Sojiro caught her eyes and began talking about the process. Sadly for her, she didn't retain much of his words, but it was a beautiful distraction.

She wished she could have been one of the coffee beans, ground and thrown into water, then turned into something different when her sister walked through the door. Makoto hopped off her chair, desperate now more than ever to know why Sae needed a face-to-face meeting.

"I-Is everything okay?"

Sae didn't meet her eyes, but Makoto could see the *pain* on her face. It was also evident in her voice. "I need you to sit down."

This is just about a threat she overheard. Everything's going to be fine. "U-Um…"

"Can we speak upstairs?"

This is just about a threat. Makoto nodded her head, her hands locked behind her back so Sae wouldn't see how nervous she was. "Um, y-yes."

It allowed her to be with Ren without trying to force the issue, and she welcomed it. She welcomed it so much that she turned and ran up the stairs and threw herself back next to Ren. He was startled at how quickly she appeared, but then he was holding one of her hands to ground her.

However, Sae took her time following after her. It got to the point that Makoto actually stood up, leaving the safety of Ren's hold, to check on her. She was also about to throw up and she needed to *know* what was going on. By the time she reached the middle of the room, Sae had finally reached the top of the stairs. There was another sign of hesitation that made Makoto's heart rate increase, but then Sae turned to meet her eyes for the first time.

"I need you to sit down."

Makoto shook her head. Sae looked like she may have been crying.

But, why? “You have to tell me what’s wrong.”

“Sit. Down.”

She fired back just as sharp. “Tell me what’s wrong!”

Makoto was shaking, in annoyance or terror, she didn’t know. She was sick, but she also hadn’t eaten since breakfast, so she figured it was natural. She heard Ren come up to her side, which was a stab at her heart as she heard him limping, but he was there. And she held onto him like he was the only thing keeping her *alive.*

Sae lowered her head, her hands balled up at her side, and she struggled to fight through whatever she wanted to say. Makoto finally stomped her foot, at the end of her rope, but knowing that whatever Sae had to say would be difficult to hear.

“There’s no easy way for me to say this to you, but…”

She held her breath. She gripped Ren’s hand so tightly that she heard him cringe in pain. Sae was never this hesitant to say anything. She had to brace herself.

And when the words came out of her mouth, Makoto felt the world collapse around her.

“Your father is dead.”

Sae kept her head towards the ground. Ren stiffened next to her. Makoto felt like she was stabbed, but wide awake. Numb, but very aware of where she was and what was happening. She shook her head. Because how was that even *possible?* Her dad was invincible. There was no way.

“I-I d-don’t…” She shook her head again, refusing to let the dread invade her heart. It wasn’t true. Why Sae thought she could *say* something like this to her was beyond her. It infuriated her. “Why would you say that?!”

There was a change in the room when she watched her sister raise her head and caught the tears on her face. “I’m sorry, Makoto.”

No.

No…

If she shook her head long enough and hard enough, the words would go away. The pain would go away. It would all be a *lie.* "N-N…No…"

One last look at her sister was all it took for her knees to give out from under her. Sae was never a liar, nor would she ever stoop so low to tell her something like this without it being *true.* It didn't make sense, because her dad was always there, always proving to the bad guys, and even the good guys, that no one could escape the law. He was always there *with her* , pushing her along and helping her grow and watching her become something she could be proud of…

In a *second* , it was gone.

Her foundation.

Her pride.

Her *everything.*

She would never see him again. He would never tell her he was proud. He would never lift her spirits up when she needed him to. He would never be there when she graduated, went off to college, went off to the police academy. He would never be there to help guide her when the world was against her…

Makoto had no idea what she was clinging to or where she was. All she could do was scream to release the pain, the anger, all her hopes for her future that now meant *nothing.* Her mouth was covered by something, but that didn't stop her wails. She could vaguely feel her body fall onto something soft, much softer than whatever she was crying into, but there was little comfort for her anymore.

There were voices reaching out to her, but they weren't her dad. Because he was *dead.*

There was a hand on her head, trying to soothe her, but it didn't belong to her dad. He was *dead!*

There were arms around her, holding her tightly, just like her dad had done the night before, when she told him she loved him, and he loved her. And now that would forever haunt her as the last thing she ever said to him…because he was *dead!*

She gripped the shirt of whoever she was attached to and screamed as loud as she could, hoping that it would wake her up and she would be back at home with her mom and her dad and her sister…

It took the last reserve of energy from her and she collapsed against the body of the person who would never again be her father.

Chapter 166

Chapter 166

Okay my plan is to upload these next two chapters and a brand new one that was not uploaded to Google.

And then I'll try and upload a new chapter every 1-2 weeks.

All Ren wanted to do that day was rest.

He had been unable to fall asleep for long that night, terrified he was back in that damn interrogation room, waiting for Akechi to break the door open and kill him. The pain was an ever reminder of how *lucky* he was, but he also considered it proof he was alive. He appreciated Takemi seeing him on short notice, having medication ready for him that same hour, but if he was terrified of anything, it was the darkness. And being unable to move or feel *pain.*

Makoto's presence was a godsend. His body knew immediately when she was next to him, feeling so much lighter and at ease than he had been since he last left her side. When she let him snuggle up with her, he was out. He was at peace. Her breathing and the fingers in his hair were the only antidote he could ask for. The bruises would heal in time. His fear, not so much. And she helped him conquer it.

They found peace together. As long as she was with him, he could do anything.

But when her sister told her that her father was *dead,* his pain suddenly felt like nothing. His injuries were fully healed to welcome a greater sense of heartache. The news took Makoto several agonizing seconds to let sink in, but when it did, it *destroyed* her.

Ren counted himself lucky enough to be able to catch her before she collapsed to the floor. She gripped his shirt, the chaffing on the back of his neck proof that she was holding on for dear life. She screamed into his chest once he pulled her into him, hoping not to alarm anyone down in the café. He could usually find something to say to her to make her feel better, or to calm down again, but this time, there was nothing he *could* say.

He was reminded that he wasn't fully healed and he was still in a great deal of pain the longer he tried to support her weight. Sae recognized his facial expression, then walked up to both of them to try and take Makoto from him. He was touched at the thought, and he didn't want to tear either of them apart for selfish reasons, but he really wanted to keep Makoto in his arms. He just wanted to sit down.

Makoto fought against her sister, so she did the next best thing and helped *him* sit down on his couch. Makoto threw her head against him, hitting a spot that was already bruised, but he wasn't about to tell her to stop. If it helped her, he would allow it. Anything to ease her pain, even if that meant putting him in more pain.

But his heart hurt for her sister, too. Ren had only met with Sae a few times, but she was Makoto's sister. Not only that, but she *saved* his life. He would have been killed had it not been for her. While he knew her relationship with Sanada was fragile, he couldn't imagine losing a parent before they could repair it. Just like how he would be devastated if one of his parents died before he could talk to them one more time.

When Makoto's sobs started to ease up, Sae shot to her feet, an expression on her face that made him fear she was going to do something stupid. Before she could storm off, he called out to her. "Wait. Please."

He didn't honestly think that would be enough to stop her, but it did. "My father is *dead.* I watched him *die."* She turned to him in a rage. "I will not *stop* until everyone who ever stood in his way is locked in a cell for the rest of their lives!"

She was very intimidating, and it hurt to admit, but he saw a lot of

Sanada in her just now. But then he realized what she had said. “Y-You watched it?”

With her rage and the circumstances that had been surrounding everyone for months, Ren knew it wasn’t some sickness that crept up on Sanada. But...why? How was Ren’s supposed death not enough? How could they have prevented this?

“What happened?”

He worried he was going to scare her away, so he tried to throw a rope for her to hold on to. “I can’t even begin to imagine what you’re going through, but he did so much for me, and our friends. If this is about what’s been happening to us, we can help you get the answers and justice you deserve.”

The anger still flashed in her eyes. He tried a different tactic. “And your sister needs you. You’re the only other person right now who knows exactly what she’s going through.”

Finally, Sae lifted a hand to her head, taking several deep breaths to keep her anger from resurfacing. Ren didn’t know which version of her he would rather see: the scary, angry one, or the remorseful, broken one.

“The others will be here soon. I don’t know if it would be easier for you to talk to all of us, but we will do everything we can to help.” Ren felt a small pang of guilt when Sae ran a hand under her eyes. “I promise.”

He felt Makoto fall against him completely. He quickly checked on her, realizing her shoulders were no longer shaking and she had grown quiet. He thought she was asleep, even if her breaths were short and staggered. He held onto her tightly, hoping she could find a small sense of comfort with him.

His attention went back to Sae when she crossed her arms and leaned back against the banister. He didn’t want to force her to talk, so he waited patiently for her to speak up. With another sigh and a quick wipe at her eyes, she looked up at the empty room and started to talk.

“I met with Akechi at the station. I usually take him out for sushi when we wrap up a case, and I fell right into his trap.” Ren’s heart pounded against his ribs before it fell into the basin of his stomach. “I don’t know why Minako was out and about, but she found us, and he took both of us into that world. And like an *idiot,* Akihiko had to come try and play the hero and get us out.”

Her voice cracked and he swallowed hard, unable to say anything to her. “He shot him. He was going to kill my mother and then he shot him!”

He didn’t know what to do. He didn’t know what to say. All he could do was sit there, horrified, that fear making him dizzy and light-headed. After all their hard work to save *him* from Akechi, they didn’t think about anyone else. That was the monumental victory for all of them. That was supposed to be the end of the pain, the death, the terror. Why was he so stupid in believing Akechi would have stopped with *him?*

And now, Makoto’s father was *dead.*

“Amamiya.”

He hadn’t realized how badly his eyes were burning until he heard his name. Sae had pushed herself off the railing, narrowing her eyes at him, and making him feel like she was about to rip his head off. “He put everything on the line to save you. Do *not* let yourself feel like this was your fault. Akechi had this planned out before I even received the calling card from you. All we can do now is use that pain, that anger, to keep fighting for what Akihiko tried to expose.”

He felt that crack in his subconscious at her words. Sanada wasn’t his father. He never had that bond like Makoto had with him, obviously. But he had done so much for him, more than his own parents had been willing to do, in the short time he knew the man. He could still remember the day Sanada fought like hell to save Makoto in that club. The day Okumura was killed, and he gave him a place to stay, telling him that no one needed to be alone after that kind of traumatic event. He listened to his story about his assault, was willing to help him out, had trusted him to save his daughter…

Ren rubbed at his eyes, trying not to fall apart when Sae and Makoto had more of a right to be so distraught. “Minako. Is she okay?”

The sorrow that returned to Sae’s face was another dagger to his heart. “I don’t know. Mitsuru tells me she will recover in time.”

“How did you guys escape?” Ren wanted to kick himself, curious, but knowing it was too soon. The last thing he wanted to do was keep Sae talking about something that she didn’t really want to talk about.

But, she answered him. “Mitsuru knew how to find us. Some other monster came and fought Akechi off. I guess it knew my mother, or, that’s what she said.”

Ren may not have had a clear mind, but he heard that loudly enough. “Minako fought with a persona?”

Sae reacted just as he did. “W-Why is that odd? Akihiko had one, according to Mitsuru.”

He could have been misunderstanding her, but... “She said she couldn’t summon them anymore. She lost that ability.”

Maybe Minako had snapped losing someone she loved. Given he knew very little about how this power was even accessible, Ren didn’t count anything out. However, Sae continued to look at him with a question in her eyes, so he shook his head and tried to give her some hope. “If she really did summon one, then she might have been worn out after knowing you were safe. Hopefully, she’ll be just fine.”

His words seemed to bring some comfort to Sae. “I’ll keep checking on her, so please, keep Makoto safe.”

Knowing she was about to leave, he checked to see if Makoto was still out before looking back to Sae. “You need to stay. If Akechi tried to kill you in that other world, he’s going to do everything he can to stand against you here. If you want justice for your father’s death, you’re not going to find it working with them.”

Ren held his breath. It was a brazen request, asking her to stay and help his friends after something so horrific. But he meant it. If she went back to work, where Akechi had power, it would get her nowhere. Or thrown in prison. Or in danger. He refused to break Makoto's heart a second time because he let her walk away and back to the wolves and have them tear her to pieces.

To his amazement, Sae didn't leave. He offered the seat next to him for her to sit down, but she shook her head. When she made a move for the stairs, he worried he wouldn't be able to stop her again. However, she met his eyes, and despite the hell that had been the day she had gone through, she offered him a weak smile.

"I really need some caffeine."

It brought his breath out of his lungs and into the air as a quiet laugh. He nodded his head as she headed down to the café. His weak laugh made Makoto shift against him, bringing his mind back to the painful reality that she was suffering from the loss of someone she loved so much.

He hoped she wouldn't wake up, but she started twisting and turning, a sign she was coming to. A few minutes later, Makoto was mumbling and pushing herself up in her seat. She grabbed at her head, and he felt like an idiot for not asking Sae to bring up some water for her. Or food really. She hadn't eaten since before she arrived. Hell, he hadn't eaten in over a day.

"R-Ren?"

While he was nervous about how she would react to being awake, he was relieved to hear her voice again. He could talk to her, tell her he would support her and help her, just like she had always been willing to do for him when he was lost and scared. "I'm right here, Makoto."

It took her a few more seconds to focus her eyes on him, but they were devoid of that spark that made her so uniquely her. That few seconds was all it took for her to go through the memories of the past hour and fall back against the couch.

“Is he…is he really…is it really true?”

He didn’t answer her. Instead, he wrapped both of his arms around her, hoping it would comfort her. Her arms slowly lifted around his back, and she held onto him as tightly as she could. She wasn’t crying nearly as hard as she was before, but she was still very much upset. He didn’t expect her *not* to be, and he would be there for her even when she thought she was okay. That kind of pain could change the very person she was, and he’d never be able to live with himself if she slipped away from the path her father would have wanted her to take.

However, just as soon as he got her to relax again, Makoto pushed on his chest and took advantage of the pain that paralyzed his body. He tried to find his voice to call out to her, but he could do nothing as she made a beeline for the stairs, probably trying to get to a hospital, or find her sister, or worse yet, find Akechi…

“Makoto!”

By the time he was able to move, he saw Makoto walking back up the stairs, her sister pushing her along from behind. Sojiro was behind Sae, carrying a tray of what looked like coffee and curry. It was a touching gesture, and his stomach roared to life at the sight of food. Ren allowed Sae and Makoto to take the couch while Sojiro placed the tray on his desk, and he took a seat at the foot of his bed.

“Gotta tend to the customers,” the elder said as he headed back to the stairs. “If you need anything at all, give me a holler.”

“Thank you.” Sae grabbed Makoto’s sleeve when she moved to stand up, which was enough to keep her in her seat. “You need to eat something. You’ll feel better.”

“I want to know what happened.”

Sae spared him a look, but he didn’t know what to tell her. If he were to be honest, Makoto deserved to know the truth, if she didn’t know it already. She would be furious, yes, and keeping her away from Akechi would become a number one priority, but keeping her in the dark was more cruel than telling her.

“You need to eat first, Makoto.”

She shook her head with a scowl. “No! Not until you tell me!”

It was hard to feel like he wasn’t intruding, but he really had nowhere to go. He couldn’t go downstairs, or out for a walk to gather his own thoughts and emotions. All he really could do was take a seat at his desk and pretend to be occupied with his curry. It did smell really good. Eventually, it pulled him over to his desk, and that was what he did to give them their space.

Maybe once Makoto knew what happened, she would be able to eat *something.* “Akechi…kidnapped your mother and I and took us to that world. We were a means to an end. Akihiko must have found out, and…he came to take us back. And…Akechi…h-he shot him.”

As hungry as he was, it was hard for Ren to eat anything when someone so intimidating and strong sounded so *weak.*

Makoto’s shout literally made him drop his spoon. “Mom?! He killed Mom, too?!”

“No.” Sae had to grab Makoto once again to keep her on the couch. “She’s just…tired, I assume. Mitsuru will be keeping me updated.”

Makoto fell silent after that, likely exhausted from the emotional turmoil she had to endure. It broke his heart, being unable to take her pain away, or say anything to bring her spirits up. He wanted to turn back time, to try and talk to Akechi in that room, or all the other times he had made unannounced visits to Leblanc. There had to have been more he could have done to keep Akechi from crossing a line and killing Makoto’s father, or even *him.*

But he knew Akechi was only one person in a giant game that they were looking for. Sanada was likely too close to the truth, and Akechi made sure that this time, he was taken care of for good.

Shaking his head, Ren turned back to the curry in front of him. Instead of digging back in, he pushed himself out of his seat, bit back the pain that came from his actions, and turned to hand the tray to Sae and Makoto. “You should eat something, Makoto.”

His heart flipped in his chest when she nodded her head. Sae stood and took one of the plates from his hand with a weak smile. She was quick to return to her seat, hand Makoto the plate of curry, then told him to sit back down, too. He watched from the corner of his eye as Makoto made some attempt to eat, and it gave him enough peace to do the same.

It was quiet for the longest time, and he had no issues with that. In fact, the silence kept Makoto eating, and that alone filled his heart with happiness. She wasn't going to be back to her usual self for some time, but she was at least doing what was best for herself. They would all help her find her justice. She would make her dad proud by finishing the work he had started.

"Can I ask you something?"

At first, Ren thought it was Makoto asking her sister a question. When he turned his head, he realized it was Sae who had asked *him* a question. "Um, sure?"

"Do you know a Masayoshi Shido?"

There was a slight ringing in his ears, but given his injuries, he didn't find it odd. The name was familiar, but it wasn't familiar enough. "I've heard his name…"

Sae shook her head and tried to help clear that cloud in his mind. "He's likely to become the next Prime Minister of Japan. He's all over TV. He takes a serious stance against you and your friends."

Right. The man Sojiro always grumbled about when he came on the news. Why would she be asking about…

Makoto had told him once that it may have been the same man who kidnapped her dad. And if he didn't stop his investigation, maybe he took out a hit to silence him. That had to be why she was asking.

"Have you ever met him?"

She threw him off course with her question. He had never met Shido

before. He doubted he would be allowed to get close enough to him even if he tried. “No. I don’t think so.” Sae’s expression dropped, which prompted him to ask, “Why?”

She shook her head. “It’s nothing.”

Makoto, however, wouldn’t stand for it. “You asked for a reason, Sis. He’s the one who works with Akechi! Dad said he did! He tells Akechi who to kill and he does! That’s why he killed Dad!”

Makoto rarely reacted this violently, but given the circumstances, Ren couldn’t fault her. But was it true? And why would someone who was running for Prime Minister want to destroy the country with chaos the public would never be able to link to him?

Then again, why *wouldn’t* someone create unnecessary panic so they could stand at the pinnacle and promise false security to make themselves look good? By getting rid of the Phantom Thieves, and the only cop who tried to make him pay for his crimes, he could now control the Metaverse, and have the ability to eliminate anyone who stood against him.

It was terrifyingly brilliant.

He heard Sae exhale deeply. “I ask because I’ve recently been in contact with the woman you saved that day in your hometown.”

He had not been expecting to hear that. He was so stunned that his mouth opened, but nothing came out. Was that why she had been asking about his offense the other day? Did she really go that far out of her way to find the only witness to his innocence? And *why? How?* There was nothing that could be done to reverse his charge, and had he not been at the wrong place at the wrong time, he wouldn’t be *here.*

“Akihiko was no fool. If I were to have executed the search warrants like I had planned, he would have been able to keep you all safe. It was what frustrated me the most. The fact that he *knew* , and nothing I could say to him would ever get him to reveal who you were.”

The sinking feeling began to pull on him, but he didn't want to stop Sae from talking. "If I wanted your names, I figured I would need something equally as meaningful to him. He had been trying to find a link between Akechi and Shido for months, and when I received the tip, I ran with it. I met with Akechi's mother's best friend, and her daughter was the one you lost your freedom for."

It was too much for his mind to absorb. But Sae was able to fit one last piece of information into his brain before it shut off.

"Shido is not only the man who you stood up against, but he is also Akechi's father."

…Shit.

He could only sit frozen in his seat, speechless.

"D-Did you tell Dad?"

It took him some time to ground himself, but the sadness in Sae's tone made him zone back in. "No. I learned it the same day you presented me with the calling card, and I didn't have the chance to…"

Makoto was on her feet the next second. "If this is true, then Shido must have a palace."

It was hard for him to focus. First, he was still upset about the fact Akechi had the nerve to kill Makoto's father and thought no one could touch him. Second, if Akechi really was Shido's son, that made Shido equally as guilty. And if Shido really was the person who thought he could ruin his life, then how many *other* lives would he ruin? With Sanada out of his way, he probably thought the world was his for the taking.

Well, he would be wrong. Ren may never have cared about the man that slapped him with a criminal record, but he *did* care about everyone else he ruined. Futaba, Haru, and Makoto lost a parent because of his desire to keep control. So many other people were *dead* because they tried to stop this man. Those with good hearts

weren't going to have the courage to stand up to him after all he had done…

But they would. He would *love* the chance to thank Shido personally for branding him a criminal. He would be able to witness first-hand what could happen if enough good people worked together.

"We should okay it with everyone else first." He was surprised Makoto sounded as calm as she had been, but even more surprised that she would think the others *wouldn't* offer to help. But he didn't challenge her, worried that if he did, she would snap. With the hell she had been through, he didn't want to be the source of her tears or her rage.

Not even five minutes after the conversation died, Futaba was running up the stairs with Morgana at her heels. She was usually the first one to arrive, since she only lived a block away, but she stopped at the top when she realized there were more people than she was used to.

"Oh." He also realized that she always sat in the same spot, on the couch, and he wasn't even ready for guests to be there. Futaba shot a look to him, but Sae was the one to break the ice.

"I'll wait for you downstairs, Makoto," she said as she came to her feet. "We can talk when we get home."

Ren wanted to tell her she could stay, but the words wouldn't come out of his mouth in time. Futaba held her computer closer to her chest as she watched Sae disappear down the stairs. "I, uh, didn't mean to be rude."

He shook his head. "No. We had…a lot to talk about…"

"Ah." She hesitated a moment longer before she took her seat on the couch. He was suddenly worried about Makoto's state of mind now that her sister wasn't next to her. Would she be okay where she was, or would she want to sit next to him on the bed? But saying something now would bring up questions, and he wasn't sure if Makoto was ready to have the terrible news broadcast to their friends.

“Um.” Futaba shifted uncomfortably in her seat, her eyes darting from the stairs, to Makoto, to him. “I-Is everything, okay?”

He didn’t want to say yes or no, but the longer he waited for Makoto to say something, the harder it became to breathe. After what felt like hours, Makoto fell back to the couch, threw her hands to her face, and started to cry.

Futaba jumped back in shock, but Ren pushed himself up to sit in between the two of them. As soon as he was seated, Makoto threw herself into his chest. Maybe holding a meeting today wasn’t the best of ideas. She clearly needed her space, and with friends coming over at any time, she wasn’t about to have it.

He was going to ask her if she wanted to go home, to spend this time mourning with her sister, but he stopped himself. He thought it would be insulting to discuss a strategy about how to get closure for her father’s murder without her. She would want to be a part of this operation. He could tell everyone today was a bad day, and they could meet up another day. Or have a meeting through text...

He figured it was better to ask than assume. And with Futaba the only one there who didn’t know, he thought it was a good time. “Do you want to stay here, Makoto?”

It was a whisper, hoping Futaba wouldn’t question the secrecy, but Makoto was quick to nod her head against his chest. After composing herself as best she could, she leaned back, then wiped at her eyes. “I’ll be okay…”

One by one, the rest of their friends staggered inside. He thanked Yusuke and Haru for making his room more presentable for everyone, to which Haru waved him off and Yusuke chuckled under his breath. Haru did give Makoto a concerned look, but thought it best not to question her. Her eyes studied him for half a second before she took her seat and looked away.

Ann and Ryuji brought energy to the room (like they usually did), but even *they* noticed something off in the vibes. Ann took a seat, brushing a strand of hair over her shoulders, then turned her eyes to him. “How are you feeling?”

Terrible. Makoto was ripped to shreds. The news broke his heart, too. Now that he thought about it, Ren worried about how the news would affect the rest of them as well. If Makoto chose to say something, Ryuji would lose his mind. Futaba might clam up again. Sanada had done so much to protect each of them, unknowingly, and yet, they never got a chance to thank him. They never *would* .

“Um.” Futaba cleared her throat, then continued. “I guess something has happened, and Kirijo-san isn’t going to be able to make it. So I’m going to be corresponding with Fuuka so we can all stay on the same page.”

It was another reminder of what had happened earlier. Ren heard Makoto’s cries, but instead of burying herself in his chest, she continued to wipe her face with the back of her hands.

Haru was the first to ask. “Are you okay, Mako-chan?”

It was the tense moment where Ren didn’t know if he should deflect attention, give Makoto a hug, or let her control the situation. “I-I’m sorry…”

Haru got out of her seat to kneel in front of her. “Oh, don’t say that. What’s wrong?”

All he could do was put a hand on her leg to let her know he was there, too. If she looked at him in a way that told him she didn’t want everyone to know, he would stop the questions. But he wasn’t sure if she would want him to break the news to them either…

“M-My dad is dead…”

Like a bolt of lightning, the tension evaporated, leaving nothing but the aftermath behind. Haru’s hands covered her mouth in horror, but then she was standing in front of Makoto and hugging her around her neck. The others reacted much the same, but remained frozen in their seats.

Until Ryuji jumped to his feet in a rage. “What?!”

Ann was the closest one to him and she yanked on his shirt to try and keep him quiet. “Ryuji...”

“Sanada’s *dead?!”*

“Ryuji, stop.”

Ann and Yusuke tried to calm him down, but Ryuji erupted in a fury. He kicked at the chair he had been sitting on, then kicked it again after it fell over. Morgana was the one to keep him from breaking anything, or drawing unnecessary attention from patrons downstairs, by clawing at his leg until he stopped kicking.

“Stop it.”

Then he saw the tears on his face as he glared down at Morgana. “You want me to *stop?!* I’m gonna fucking *kill* someone!”

Ann finally stood up and slapped him across the face. The action snapped him out of his rage, but then the inevitable heartache set in. Ryuji collapsed to the ground, gripping at his hair, but much less hostile than he had been previously. Ann was quick to drop next to him and place an arm around his shoulders.

“I-I’m sorry, Makoto…” His voice cracked, then came the sobs. “I’m sorry…”

Ren gave a hell of a lot of credit to Morgana for jumping on the table Ryuji thankfully spared to take control of the meeting. “I know this has to be hard. We can take a day to ourselves if we need to, but we also don’t have a lot of time to waste.”

He heard Ryuji grit his teeth, but before he could snap again, Makoto came to her feet. “We have to investigate Masayoshi Shido, the man on track to become our next Prime Minister. He’s the man my father spent so much time trying to take down, and he was the same man who had him killed. Dad loved this city so much, so much that he wouldn’t stay knocked down when it was easier to give up. Please.” Her head fell to her chest, but in that moment, she was the strongest person he had ever met. “Please help me finish what he started.”

In a move that brought him to tears, Ryuji came to his feet, wiped at his eyes, and walked right up to Makoto. They both held each

other's eyes, then without a word, he hugged her tightly. It should have ripped Ren apart, but it did much the opposite. Yes, they would hurt, but they would fight back. They wouldn't stay down. Because one man had touched their lives when no one else would give them a chance. They would finish what he started, then continue to live by the strength he had shown them.

Futaba bolted out of her seat and nearly tackled Ryuji and Makoto to the floor. Then it was Haru, followed by Ann. Yusuke walked up to where he sat and lowered himself to the arm of the couch. "They always say that with tragedy comes strength. I would like to believe our enemies have made a serious mistake if they thought such heartache would keep us down."

Ren finally pushed himself to his feet. "It's time to show them just how serious of a mistake they made."

Chapter 167

Chapter 167

She was surrounded by darkness, but Minako knew better than to be afraid of it.

She had spent a year in something similar, unable to move, unable to speak, but conscious of every sound or movement around her. It was true hell, if she were to be honest, spending an infinite amount of time staring into nothingness while hearing each second tick by every minute, every hour, every day…

Death would have been a blessing, but even Death was afraid of the abyss.

The last time she had fallen into this state, she could remember her friends, the same people who fought at her side that year, but their faces would fade over time. She started to forget little details about them. She couldn't remember Yukari's favorite flower, or Junpei's favorite video game, or Mitsuru's favorite restaurant. She forgot why Ken hated eating vegetables or how Fuuka became so invested in technology. She missed spending hours with Shinjiro in the kitchen cooking dinners for their friends. She missed feeling safe with Aigis, the wind in her hair on a walk with Koromaru, and listening to the beat of Akihiko's heart as she snuggled up with him at night.

A year of hell for a year of precious memories. It was worth the sacrifice if her friends were happy.

This time, however, she had much more to be afraid of.

One year was all she had to remember before. Now, she had over thirty years of memories waiting to slip through her fingertips. She had two children, both causing her their fair share of trouble, sorrow, and joy. Sae was her curious little adventurer, but always knew her limits. Makoto was her rebellious troublemaker, always wanting attention and *pushing* her limits.

She could still see Sae as a baby, wrapped in blankets, brought to her for the first time by Akihiko. He had been so nervous, but he was so happy, and they both sat in bed for hours staring down at their first-born daughter. She could remember holding Makoto after a terrible night of labor, curious to know what Sae thought of her new sister, and laughing as her daughter poked Makoto with her finger to see if she was even *real.*

They both loved their dad. He had the strength and the stamina to wrestle with them, even as they got older, while still being able to do his job. A job that, in the end, destroyed his family. She could remember every single time she wanted to leave him, had her things packed *to* leave him, but she didn't. She remembered every fight, every vile word and accusation that came from her mouth, while he kept telling her he just wanted them to be *safe.*

She remembered *everything* , right until he walked out the door to do his *job,* because he had to keep his family *safe.*

And now, he was dead.

The darkness didn't frighten her as much as that thought did. Whenever Akihiko was knocked down, he stood back up. From the death of his parents (that he never really told her about), to the death of his sister, his best friend, his partner, *and* losing his relationship with his daughter, he *always* got back up. Whether it was physical or mental, he would heal, he would find a source of strength, and he would fight back.

She could still see the blood on his chest. She could still feel the coolness of his skin. She could still taste the salt from her tears as she screamed at the gods for taking him away from her. The future she wanted to have with him was gone. The future she wanted him to have with Sae, and with Makoto, was gone. *He* was gone.

What would that do to her children? Sae was bound to take it the hardest. She had been there, and like her, had been unable to stop it from happening. She would drown in her regret, never being able to have that heart to heart with a man who loved her dearly. She would float back in the middle of truth and lies, watching all of Akihiko's hard work go up in smoke because they never had the

time to put it all together…

Makoto would be devastated. Her father was her world. She always stood at his side, even when Minako wouldn't, even when Sae was down her *throat* and asking her to pick a side. Makoto understood her sister's pain, why she was so angry all the time, but she would not let her dad suffer when he was only doing what he thought was best.

Would her children miss her? She wouldn't be able to have any more coffee chats with Sae. She wouldn't be able to hear any more stories about Makoto and her boyfriend. She wouldn't be able to watch Sae get her revenge on Akechi or watch Makoto follow in her father's footsteps.

But, if she had somehow saved Akihiko, she would welcome the darkness for as long as it wanted to keep her captive.

She just didn't *know.*

If she had to guess, he was alive. After all, the darkness only ensnared her when she went over the top to *save* someone, or to save the future of the *many* . And bringing Akihiko back from the dead was all the *many* would need to have a *future.*

"We meet again, my dear."

When she had been held captive to the darkness before, she could hear voices. It wasn't unusual. She just couldn't *speak* or *move* or do anything but listen. Ryoji came into her view, lighting up the darkness enough to see that damn smile of his, like everything was okay and *nothing* was okay.

All she wanted to ask him was if her children were okay, if Akihiko was okay, and then she could remain a slave to this hell forever.

"You're troubled." He took a seat next to her, which was odd to see, because there was nothing to sit on. "You're unhappy with your decision."

There were tears coming to her eyes, and she was desperate to ask the question she knew she would never be able to get out. She

could only hope that he understood and *told* her the truth.

His smile faded. His head lowered. His eyes dimmed with sadness. Her heart stopped beating in her chest. “I never wanted to see you again,” he started quietly. “I never wanted you to remember the pain and loneliness that took you away from your happiness. Yet, here you are, suffering just the same.”

She felt something on her arm, and even in the darkness, she could make out his hand. “You were willing to sacrifice your happiness to give the world a future. To remain in this hell for as long as need be because you loved the world you fought for. That is a kind of love I will never be able to comprehend.”

Where are my children?

“You can ask me your question, Minako.” His fingers gripped her arm lightly, but then the smile appeared. “You are not dead, nor are you in the same space that tried to consume you years ago.”

That was a motivator to get her to move. She hadn’t tried, remembering exactly how she felt in the abyss the first time, and feeling that same way in this one. If this wasn’t the same world, why was he here? Why was *she* here? Where were her children?

“M-My children…” Minako coughed, the sound of her own voice foreign to her ears. Her hands went to her throat as her lungs pulled in the air around her too quickly. How was any of this possible? “My children…”

“You fear for their safety, yes?”

She only nodded her head.

“You need not worry, my dear.”

It wasn’t a *they’re fine* or *they’re dead,* and it wasn’t good enough for her. “Are they o-okay?”

Ryoji offered her a weak smile that did not make her feel any better. “You only need to look into your heart for that answer.”

She yanked her arm away from him, tired of the cryptic messages, tired of not knowing *anything,* tired of sitting in this damn space waiting for the end to come. “Where are they?!”

He seemed to think her reaction was amusing. It angered her even more. “I know you feel lost, but you’re the only one of us that can answer your question. I do not have that connection with your children.”

“Then get me out of here!” She grabbed his scarf, tears burning her eyes, and all but screamed at him. “Why am I here? Where are my kids? And Aki?! Why would I be here if you didn’t want me here?!”

He carefully placed his hands on hers, a softness to his features that calmed her down slightly. “Fate has always been cruel to you. But be warned, my dear, Death is only afraid of the one who gives life.”

Minako saw the change in his eyes. Her body went numb.

“And when you face God, you will know true fear.”

She blinked and he was gone, leaving her alone in the darkness once again. Was he serious? Was this when she would face God? Did that mean she really was dead? How long would she be alone before someone showed up again? If she screamed, would she wake up?

“Minako.”

An unfamiliar voice after Ryoji’s terrifying statement sent a chill up her spine. This had to be the god that would end her life. And she would never know if Sae and Makoto were safe, or if Akihiko had survived…

She thought it best to face the fear head-on so at least she could go out with honor. When she turned, she expected to see some bright light with a barely visible figure in the middle. What would a god look like anyway if it wasn’t the opposite of death and hell?

Her breath caught in her throat. Her heart came to a stop again.

“It *is* you!”

The darkness around her began to blur into a mix of black and blue and it was a little overwhelming. But she righted herself before she fell over, worried that if she did, she would return to the abyss that stole her humanity.

And if Theodore was the god Ryoji had been so afraid of, she would laugh in his face if she ever saw him again.

Minako ran as fast as she could and he caught her as she jumped into him. After so many years, he was back. She wasn't alone. She had missed him and his comfort *terribly.*

"I missed you so much!"

He, however, didn't seem as happy to see her. "Why are you here, Minako?"

His utter confusion killed most of that happiness she felt when she saw him. "I-I don't know…"

"We worked so hard to keep you from returning."

Why would Theo not want to see her again? Because someone else had her powers now? Because she had been a disappointment? Was that why Igor made Ren think he hated her?

"W-What do you mean?"

"You're in grave danger now, Minako."

She couldn't stop the laughter from bubbling out of her throat. "I've never been safe, Theo."

He shook his head, fear evident in his eyes, and held her shoulders back at arm's length. "Your powers have returned to you."

Wonderful. Why was that a bad thing? Now she could *help* again. "How is that bad?"

"God knows how to find you now."

It was the second time someone sounded afraid of a god. It left her confused. Wasn't God supposed to protect and save and heal? She could understand why Ryoji would be afraid of him, but not *Theo.*

"I don't understand."

Theo searched her eyes for something, but she didn't know what and she was too scared to ask. He sighed and dropped his head. "Why are you here?"

To be truthful, she didn't know where *here* was. On top of that, she didn't know how she got there at all. Just because her powers returned to her? Her friends all seemed to have some degree of exhaustion when they summoned their personas, so maybe it was natural for her to faint and her unconsciousness took her *here.*

Or something like that. "I had to save Aki. T-They killed him."

He figuratively slapped her across the face. "You were selfish."

It knocked the wind out of her lungs. Was it? At the time, the last thing she cared about was whether or not it was *selfish.* All she could think about was saving her daughter from a madman, and tapping into her powers gave her a chance to save *him.* How was that *selfish?*

"It matters not, I'm afraid."

Finally, she grew annoyed. "Then tell me what's going on. How am I back here? Where even *is* here? Stop trying to scare me when I don't even know what the hell I'm supposed to be scared of!"

Theo released her, his arms falling to his sides. A pang of regret flitted over his face, so she hoped that she would start getting some answers. And then she could get the hell out of there. "I apologize for my callousness, as I too know what it's like to be willing to sacrifice one's life to save another."

Feeling bad for snapping at him, Minako reached out for his hand. "Did you save me, all those years ago?"

His golden eyes locked with hers, and she knew his answer long

before he said it. “You deserved happiness, Minako. Depriving you of life, of joy, of emotion, it was a hell that I would not wish you to suffer. I spent so many long nights searching for you, knowing the darkness that was keeping your light from shining so brightly. The decision was easy to make once I was aware of how to free you from your hell.”

Her eyes began to sting again, finally getting some answers for her past, but not knowing what to say to the friend who let her have a future. “Then how are we meeting now? Am I really dead?”

His lips turned upwards, and she didn’t know if that was a good thing or a bad thing. “You are not.”

She could have burst at the news. “And my children? And Aki? Are they okay?”

“I’m afraid I do not know.” Her happiness deflated instantly. “The only reason I know you are alive is because you are here.”

“Wh-What does that mean?” If she could figure out how to get out of here, would he let her go? Would they be able to see each other again? She was so happy to see him, but at the same time, she needed to check on her family. And so far, no one knew anything in this world, or place…

“This is your Velvet Room.”

She didn’t know how many more sucker punches her body could take. “What?”

Theo stood tall, crossed an arm over his chest, and bowed lightly. “Welcome home, my dear.”

It looked nothing like she remembered, minus the faint blue tones on the edges of her vision. There was no elevator. There was no Igor. And she had *much* she wanted to say to that bastard. “H-How…H-How am I…”

“Allow me to do my best,” he said when she failed to find the right question to ask. “My master had been weakened by the lack of my presence. The seal began to weaken considerably without his

strength, which allowed me to break free and find this place once more. He has been missing ever since. As such, your consciousness has changed the appearance of your Velvet Room. Your fear of the abyss that claimed you is now what claims this space. However, it is harmless. It is only your deepest fear materialized."

Igor was missing? Then how was he speaking to Ren? Were they in a different space and Theo didn't know?

"Your powers have returned because you wished them to. The sorrow you experienced and your desire to protect is what shattered that veil. That pain was much stronger than the first time you awoke to them, which is why you have returned here."

Minako had spent half of her life waiting for this moment, but it was a little too much for her now. Maybe in some sense, she was better off *not* knowing. But if this was the price to pay to bring Akihiko back, she would do it a million times over.

Then, Theo's eyes darkened much like Ryoji's had before he left her. "And in doing so, God now knows how to find you."

"You keep talking about a god that's terrible." She grabbed her head, trying to understand everything while understanding nothing. "Why are you so afraid of him? And why would he be after me?"

Theo inhaled slowly. "My master spoke of this day long before I met you. How humanity would lose their way. How a terrible darkness would claim the land. There would be no death. There would be no life. There would only be nothing. The hell you experienced once before would become the world."

It was like a fairy tale, and she couldn't help but laugh at how ridiculous it all was. "This is insane."

"He also spoke of a light that could break through the darkness and restore balance to the world." Minako was about to tell him that was a *good* thing when he frowned. "You carry Death, my dear. While your valiant efforts saved the many years ago, Death fears God. Your powers will never be enough."

“S-So what am I supposed to do now?”

“I feared that reawakening Death would cause the world to slip asunder, thus destroying the sacrifice you bravely fought for.” His voice weakened and his eyes lost that spirit that made him look alive. “With Death now free from its confines, God will stop at nothing to eliminate it. By doing so, my master’s fears will be realized.”

He took a deep breath before he spoke back up. “I did all I could to keep those chains on Death, to keep you safe and happy, but Fate is always cruel.”

Theo was the reason she had the headaches? *He* was the reason she could never reach out to her personas? “Y-You tried to keep him from me?”

His hands flew between them as a sign of peace. “I could feel your presence while I was in the abyss. You were happy. You had a family to love and to love you. There has never come a point in your life where you would need to be reunited with Death.”

It was all so hard to accept. “And now you think that by my selfish actions, I’m going to destroy the world when this *God* comes to kill me?”

“Would you rather your husband be dead, or trapped in the darkness you suffered, never being able to see you, or your children, until infinity lost all meaning?”

It was the last sucker punch she could handle. “I would do it all over again, because I wanted to save my daughter. I wanted him to have that moment with her he had been fighting for these last few years. God doesn’t *scare* me. *Death* scares me, and I chose to fight with him. And I’ll fight this terrifying God if that keeps my family happy and safe.”

“You will lose that fight, Minako.”

For the first time since coming to this world, she smiled at him. “If I’ve learned anything from watching my children and their friends, I

know anything can happen if we all work together. So help me, Theo, and together, with all of us, we will prove Igor, and you, wrong."

He stared back at her, horrified. "Y-You're serious?"

"I am."

"Your gamble could very well destroy the world you live in, the future for your children, and the generations to come."

She pat his arm, a swell of strength filling her heart. "Then we know how hard we have to fight. And we will. God will learn to fear Death just as much as I fear the darkness."

Defeated, Theo let out a dramatic sigh. "I wish you would reconsider, but you have always had a spirit that contests Fate. Very well." He bowed to her again, his eyes glowing with the pride she had been so used to seeing. "I will face this fear with you. It will give me a wonderful story to tell my master when he returns."

As soon as his hand grabbed hers, Minako felt a sharp pain in her head, her stomach, her heart. The world started to blur, but Theo continued to smile at her with warm eyes. It upset her for a moment, but she was blinded by the pain. She was going to be sick. Everything was on fire. Was this a test? Was this the death God wanted her to have?

"Minako."

The noise stabbed her through the skull, making her ears ring and her breathing become more labored. Was she dying? Was that not really Theo? Or had the answers to her past been the only thing keeping her from dying, and now that she knew them, it was over?

"Minako."

If only she had the strength to punch someone. Theo, Ryoji, *God.* Someone was tempting her, and it was annoying. It was like suffering a serious migraine and having Makoto scream directly into her ear because she wouldn't let her have any of her candy before bed.

“Minako.”

Leave me alone!

“Wake up!”

Theo wasn’t calling out to her. It was a female voice. One that was oddly familiar, but her name was eluding her. She wanted desperately to open her mouth and ask her to stop talking, yet she clung to it at the same time. If she could just reach out and grasp the sound, maybe she would be able to open her eyes and end this crazy mental trip of a lifetime.

“Minako?”

It took more strength than she ever thought she would need to force her eyes open. The light hit her painfully and on reflex, her eyes closed again.

“Minako, wake up.”

It was Yukari. Yukari was alive, last she remembered. That jolt got her to open her eyes and fight back against the light. “Y-Yu… Yukari?”

Her throat was raw, and saying her name left her feeling more tired and worn out than when she was fighting against the light. She suddenly wanted the darkness to take her back and let her *rest* .

“Oh thank god.” There was a warmth in her hand that felt nice. It wasn’t Theo’s, but she welcomed it anyway. “You’ve been out for so long, we started to worry you weren’t waking back up.”

She wanted to sleep. Her body *needed* it. At the same time, her fear seized her heart and pushed her up in the bed. She didn’t make it far, only managing to lift her head from the pillow, but Yukari came to sit at her side to steady her breathing.

“My children!”

Yukari was kind enough to help her sit up. “They’re okay, Minako. They’re okay.”

The relief that rushed over her brought the tears she had been unable to release in her unconsciousness out from her eyes. She gripped Yukari like she had just saved her. Sae and Makoto were okay. She finally had her answer. Her children were safe. Sae had escaped. Makoto was okay…

“A-Aki…” She felt like she already knew the answer to his fate, but talking to Ryoji and Theo gave her a spark of hope. There was a chance he was okay. There was a chance she had summoned another persona to bring him back. “P-Please…”

This time, Yukari remained silent. It was all she really needed to bring the pain back into her heart. She failed. He was dead. She would never be able to see him again. She would never be able to see his face when he finally sat down with Sae and got over their past. She would never see his face when he watched Makoto graduate from high school, or college, or the police academy. She would never tell him she loved him ever again…

“Ah, you’re awake.”

She didn’t want to be. She’d rather be *dead.* That way, she could be with Akihiko and be able to tell him she was so sorry for watching him *die.* Yukari had her arms around her back, supporting her weight as she fell against her.

Your children are alive.

Minako had to fight for them at least. The last thing she would want for them was to suffer even more because she was *sorry* she couldn’t save their father. Akihiko would *never* forgive her.

“You’re quite lucky, Arisato-san.” There was a blob of white that came closer to her. After losing the strength to cry, her vision cleared just enough to make out the doctor at her side. He was the same one that helped Akihiko with his surgery a few weeks ago.

The same one that was going to tell her he was *dead.*

“Your husband sure knows how to keep me on my toes. But this… this is just…unreal.”

Your husband…

Her vision blurred and her chest heaved as she pushed herself off Yukari. “A-Aki…”

No…

Please don’t tell me he’s dead…

“P-Please…”

“A bullet went right through his heart.”

No!

“And yet…”

Please don’t tell me he’s dead!

“He’s alive.”

Chapter 168

Chapter 168

First, there was pain. Excruciating pain. Pain that became so bad that it numbed his entire body.

Then, there was nothing.

He was *dead.*

Akihiko thought death would have been peaceful. He was getting older, and he couldn't really fight or bounce back from injury or sickness like he used to. Death would have been like crossing the finish line after competing in a triathlon he never trained for. He did it, tired and body beaten, but there was a sense of relief that it was finally over.

Death also meant he could finally come face to face with the people he had been fighting so hard to *live* for. His sister. Shinji. His partner. He could see them again, talk to them again, and he had so many stories to share with them all. And being shot through the heart trying to save Minako from Akechi made him go out fighting rather than running away…

Fuck…

He was *dead.*

That was it. Life was over.

He'd never be able to know if Minako or Sae were okay. Mitsuru would have been their only saving grace, and he didn't know how she would have been able to find them in time. He'd never be able to put a stop to Shido and all his followers. He'd never know if Makoto and her friends would be okay, or if Akechi was now on a violent rampage and no one was safe.

Worst of all, he'd never be able to tell Minako he loved her again.

He'd never be able to watch Makoto grow up and change the world like she wanted to. He'd never be able to talk to Sae and tell her how sorry he was for everything he had done to her…

He wasn't like Shinji, who died to save Ken. He just so happened to be the first person Akechi killed that day. Without him there, Minako and Sae were likely to follow. Akechi wasn't about to leave witnesses. Minako sure as hell wasn't about to let him get away with it…

It was a weird feeling. There was only nothing. Like he was asleep. No dreams. No nightmares. No pain. No sorrow. It was kind of nice…

But there was no Shinji, or Miki, or anyone else he hoped to see. Was there really no life after death? Or was he somehow still alive? Or did he have to wait a little bit longer to meet with everyone? Did Shinji not want to see him, perhaps? It had been a long time since he had last spoken to him, or Miki. Would they not recognize him after all this time?

So, he figured it was a waiting kind of thing. He would keep floating along in the darkness until a light summoned him and once he was out of the darkness, they would be waiting for him. Hopefully. Akihiko didn't think he was an overly religious person, but he always thought he would see his loved ones in the afterlife. Maybe because he never accepted a god, he would never see them…

Maybe this was hell. It was far from the firepits and demons everyone painted it to be, but it was just as miserable. He'd rather feel the pain and be able to see *something* than be surrounded by *nothing.*

"Hey, dumbass."

Akihiko felt *something* , similar to being zapped by an electric current, but it opened his eyes. Instead of the darkness, he found himself standing in a room he thought he recognized. It was similar to Leblanc; a bar, comfortable booths, a rustic, yet appealing atmosphere. It was bigger, and the aroma consisted of fresh coffee and home cooked dinner, but something was very different.

The man behind the counter was *not* Sojiro. He wore a black shirt, an apron tied around his waist, hair pulled back in a low ponytail, drying a clear glass with a towel. Akihiko wanted to rush up to him, to say something to him, but he was frozen in his place.

“What? After all this time, you’re just gonna stand there like that?”

He was dead, but he was with Shinji again. That made it okay. “I-I…I don’t know…w-what to say…”

“Always been a troublemaker, this one.”

Akihiko turned to his right, where the voice had come from, and saw his *partner* sitting on one of the barstools. Just like he remembered him. “Always easy to read. Never easy to open up.”

At this point, he shook his head to clear the numbness spreading through his body. How was he *feeling* when he was *dead?* And if he spoke, would they hear him? He just wished he could have found his voice…

“Been a pain in my ass since day one,” Shinji said as he placed the now clean cup on the counter. “Probably hungry, too. Gonna have to feed him before he starts throwing a fit and crying like a baby.”

He did the only thing he could do and laughed. It sounded weak, but his own ears picked up on it. Shinji grinned, so he thought he heard him, too. Beside him, Tatsu lifted his half-filled whiskey glass and nodded to him.

“Aki!”

The sound of scurrying feet on the floor had him looking over to the opposite end of the counter. Something tightened in his chest when a little girl, his *sister* , came around the bar, beaming and eyes wide in delight. Unlike the other two, Miki charged right at him. For half a second, he worried she was going to run right through him, because she was dead, and he was dead. But she didn’t. She collided into his stomach, knocking the air out of his lungs.

What is happening here?

“I missed you so much, Aki!”

He could worry about that later. His sister was real, or at least, she *felt* real. She looked just like he remembered, too. She was still a child, but Shinji and Tatsu appeared like they had when they died. The embrace was awkward, since he was so much taller than her now, and he remembered her being able to rest her head on his shoulder…

She pulled away, a brightness in her eyes and a warmth in her smile that suddenly gave him *life.* “Come!” She grabbed his hand, not at all minding the difference in their sizes. “Come look what I made for you!”

If this was another trap, he was falling in head-first. Miki was so excited to see him. She was bouncing around on her feet, her smile never leaving her face. She never released his hand, even if she didn’t really have a good grip on it. She reminded him so much of Sae, and Makoto, when they had been this young and this happy…

They came to a stop, and Miki grabbed a piece of paper off the fridge. Shinji came to lean up against it, possibly waiting for them to get out of the way so he could continue cooking. Somehow, Tatsu stood directly behind him, as if blocking his last chance to escape.

Akihiko panicked for a split second, until Miki lifted the paper in her hands. Her smile grew weaker, her eyes lost most of the light that made her glow, but his eyes were focused on the drawing she showed him.

It was a childish drawing, but it was him, and another stick figure, and two smaller ones. They all had smiles. They were all linked together from holding hands. It could have been a million different people, but Akihiko knew exactly who they were.

His family.

The same one he was never going to see again…

“You’re going to hurt them, Aki.”

He hadn’t been expecting any of this, but the picture blindsided him.

“There’s little I can do now.”

Shinji shoved him, almost to the point he knocked him over. “You’re runnin’ away again.”

Was he? He was pretty sure he did what he thought was best to save his family. “I tried to save them…”

Would he see Minako or Sae soon? Or Makoto? Or would he never see them again and this was his punishment for failing them?

Another shove. This time, at his back. “You worked so hard to put an end to this damn case, and you’re just going to let your family drown in it all?”

What did they want him to say? He was *dead.* Akechi shot him. Sure, he could go back and *not* jump into the Metaverse and wait for someone to go with him, but Akechi wasn’t stupid. He didn’t drag Minako and Sae there with the intent of killing just him. He would have left their bodies for him to find had he waited…

“Do you love them?”

As innocent as Miki had asked her question, it angered him at the same time. “What do you guys want me to say? I *tried* to save them! Yeah, I see now I failed, okay? But what can I do? I can’t just snap my fingers and go *back!* I’m dead!”

Unfazed by his outburst, Miki lifted the paper in her hands higher, and asked again. “Do you love them?”

Akihiko released his breath, feeling more like he was surrounded by the darkness again than by the people he missed the most. “Yes. I love them. I would do anything to know they are okay.”

Miki’s earlier happiness illuminated her features once more. He watched in a haze as she folded up the drawing and handed it to him. “That makes me really happy.”

Shinji, however, gave him very little time to appreciate the gift. As soon as it was in his hands, he grabbed his collar and yanked him into his face. “You’ve been nothing but a pain in my ass since we

first met. And I know you'll *always* be a pain in my ass. But you don't belong here, Aki. This is a place for people who have made peace with their past. You're still a fucking mess."

Shinji pushed him back, which caused Akihiko to drop the paper from his hands. It took him a second or two to realize Shinji wasn't *angry* , just very *normal* , but his words left him confused. Yeah, he was upset about a lot of things he couldn't do anymore, but what more *could* he do?

Tatsu bent over to pick the drawing off the floor, then grabbed his hand and pressed it into his palm. "You love life, kid. I can see that just as easily now as I saw it then. The world needs that kind of hope. And Arigaki is correct. You're not any use to us here."

He pulled his hand away, and Akihiko couldn't keep the confusion contained. "I'm *dead,* you guys."

Shinji and Tatsu smirked at him, which sent a cold chill down his spine. Miki pulled up a small stepstool to lift herself up higher. He didn't know why she did it, but when she reached out and placed her hand over his heart, something *changed.*

"You're alive, because she loves you."

Before he could realize what the hell she had meant, everything was gone. Miki, Shinji, Tatsu…the restaurant… *gone.* He was only left with the darkness (again) and Miki's haunting last words.

"You're alive…"

There was no way…

"Because she loves you."

He had no idea what was happening, but his eyes shot open, his lungs pulled in too much air, and he struggled to calm himself down. There was no way he was alive. The hole in his chest was all the evidence he would need to prove her wrong. He had no heartbeat. He had nothing…

"Sanada?"

However, his lungs continued to keep demanding oxygen, like he had been brought back from the brink of drowning…

No…

“You’re alive.”

He could barely make out the lights above him, a fuzzy silhouette off to his right, not at all the place he was at before. He was gasping for breath. His body was shaking. All while he had *no idea* where he was or if he was really dead or not.

“Fucking Christ.”

“You’re alive.”

I’m dead!

The hole in his chest. If he could feel it, he would know. It took him most of his strength to lift one arm high enough to drop onto his chest, but there was something in his way. Fabric. A shirt. Would there be blood? Could he see it?

“Calm down, Sanada.”

“Because she loves you.”

He could feel his hand shaking on his chest. There was someone talking around him. All he could do was continue to try and find that hole, the only proof he had to tell himself he was *dead.*

“Akihiko.”

There was a pressure on his shoulders that kept him stable. He still couldn’t get enough air, but aside from his ragged breaths, he felt himself slowly calm down. In fact, he was able to calm down enough to focus his eyes on the figure looming over him.

“You’re okay.”

He couldn’t mistake that dark red hair anywhere. But…Mitsuru was alive, wasn’t she? Had Akechi somehow taken her out, too?

“I can’t believe this.”

“Akihiko. Nod your head if you can hear me.”

“You’re alive.”

Slowly, but surely, he found the ability to nod his head. This was probably some other twisted reality, or another dream. There was a hole in his heart. He was dead.

Mitsuru removed her hands from his shoulders, but he was still so lost. His shaking had subsided, and his breathing had become less erratic, but now his mind was firing on all cylinders. He wouldn’t be in a hospital room unless he was hurt, or shot, and maybe the bullet had missed. Maybe he hadn’t died, but had gone into shock. That was the only logical statement.

But there was something he needed to know that was more important. “M-Minako…”

Gods it was hard as hell to talk. The second the words were out of his mouth, he coughed dryly. Mitsuru was kind enough to hand him a glass of water as well as answer his question. “She’s asleep right now, but she’s okay.”

The relief that flooded his body made his muscles relax into the bed. If Minako was alive, they got out. She would have fought like hell to save her daughter, and then she turned around and saved him. That had to be what Miki had meant when she told him that *she* saved him. He had no idea how much time had passed after he was shot, but he considered himself extremely lucky not to have bled to death.

“Minako summoned Thanatos in order to escape.”

It had been a hell of a day, or week, or however long he had been out. He clearly heard Mitsuru incorrectly. “W-What?”

Minako summoned her persona? That was crazy. She couldn’t. She hadn’t been able to since she was in high school. Why would Mitsuru say something like that?

“Not only that, but it appears she was able to summon another to

bring you back to life."

His stomach turned violently. Had Minako saved his life by bringing him to a hospital in time, or had she brought him back from the dead? How? How did she find her powers after weeks of looking for them and failing? And why would she bring him back to life if he was *dead?*

"Because she loves you."

The longer he thought about it, the more horrified he became. Ignoring his body's protests, Akihiko sat up on the bed, catching Mitsuru off guard, and literally ripped at the shirt he wore until it fell at his sides. His hand found the scar from the bullet, right over his heart, and he knew he would have died in a matter of seconds.

"There was a fucking bullet in your chest, Sanada." The other man, his doctor, the one that he always saw, threw himself down in a chair, baffled. "I can't even say this is luck. This is a damn miracle."

He was dead. For however long, he was dead. He finally crossed that threshold and *died,* and now he would have to do it again? It was an experience he would *never* want to do again. Was his death the shock Minako had needed to reach her personas again, or was it just a coincidence? Did she really fight off Akechi and then have the strength to save him?

A part of him was touched at her compassion, but another part of him was furious. Death was natural. He couldn't go back in time to save his sister, or Shinji, or his partner. What gave Minako the right to choose to spare *his* life? He loved her, he loved their children, but he was *dead.* He was going to have to die *again!*

"You've been out for a few days, but the surgery was successful," he thought he heard Mitsuru say. He just couldn't accept the fact that he had *died* and now he was *alive.* He'd been through enough in his life, but this was a little too much, even for him.

"W-Why?"

Akihiko fell back on the bed and threw his arm over his face. His

nightmares were going to be vivid as all hell now, reexperiencing the pain, the fear, the *nothingness,* Miki and her overly cheerful demeanor…Minako may have brought him back, but he still felt like he was in limbo, caught between living and seeing those who had passed on.

“I figured you wouldn’t want a bullet in your chest to remind you that you were *dead.”*

What he couldn’t tell his doctor was that the memory would always be ingrained in his mind. How many people could say they *died* and they were brought back to life by some mysterious power?

Mitsuru came back to sit at his side. “I may not understand how you feel, or how traumatic it must be for you to be here now, but I can understand why Minako did what she did. If I had the power to bring back my father, I would have done it in a heartbeat.”

The hand by his head gripped the front of his hair. “I was *dead.* I have to go through this *again.”*

There was a painful silence that filled the room. His voice was cracking and weak, and maybe they hadn’t heard him. Maybe they didn’t know what else to say to him.

But Mitsuru always knew how to greatly upset him while making him stop and *think.* “What would you have done, Akihiko? If you saw Akechi kill Minako instead of pointing that gun at you, and you had the ability to bring her back, would you have?”

He’d like to say he wouldn’t bring her back, because he sure as hell didn’t want her to live through what he did. But he also knew her fear very well. He had spent two years believing she was dead, that he was never going to hold her or kiss her or spend the rest of his life with her. And he had only known her for a year back then. Would he have done anything to keep her alive now?

Absolutely. Without question.

Did that make it *right?* He would never know.

“Perhaps there’s a deeper reason you’re still alive, Akihiko.”

Akihiko pulled his arm off his face so he could better read Mitsuru's expression. He had no idea what she was talking about, so he chose not to comment. His doctor rubbed his face with both hands, clearly beyond words himself. He considered himself lucky to have been working with him for long enough to trust him to keep this news to their friends and not released to the public.

…What did the public know? Anything? He was pretty sure there would be chaos at the station when they found out he was *dead.*

Eventually, Mitsuru sighed. "This has put us in a bit of a bind. Amamiya cannot be seen in public, and now *you* cannot be seen in public." She rubbed both sides of her head with her fingers. "Yet the children need to investigate Shido, and they need to do it *now."*

Slowly, the terror of surviving *death* began to fade away. Shido. He had to have known what Akechi was doing. And with him *and* Amamiya supposedly dead, the signal was loud and clear not to fuck with him. His minions would squeeze the good out of the intimidated and rule with an iron fist. Makoto and her friends going after Shido, if that was possible, would hopefully disrupt that stranglehold, assuming they kept their heads up and remained focused and safe...

His heart started to race again. "M-Makoto…is, is she okay?"

Akechi wasn't going to let anyone take a break. Had his death been broadcast, and had it reached Makoto? Or did Sae tell her? It would have upset her, but Akechi could have used it to his advantage easily enough. She wasn't safe. Sae would have protected her, but she was likely traumatized as well. Makoto was not one for staying in hiding for long.

Mitsuru placed her hand on his arm. "Makoto is fine. Sae is fine. They will both be delighted to know you're okay."

Makoto would be for sure, but he worried Sae was either plenty mad at him or wouldn't believe he was alive. She did watch him *die* …

His doctor came up to stand behind Mitsuru. "You're not gonna be allowed to leave for at least a week. Just to make sure you're actually *living* ." He rubbed his face again, then shook his head with

a sigh. “Then you owe me the longest vacation I’ve ever had.”

Mitsuru looked over her shoulder to the doctor. “You have my gratitude.”

“I guess I still get to make money off this piece of shit, huh?” he said with a shrug of his shoulders. “Guess you do have a lot of work to do here.”

Did he? Is that why Mitsuru told him he was alive for a reason? It would have been nice to see his family again, to watch Makoto follow in his footsteps and work with her sister, but everyone was going to die at some point. The world could have figured out Shido’s game plan without him. There were still *good* people out there.

“Shido must be dealt with before the election is over.” Mitsuru crossed her arms, but there was an odd smile coming to her face. “Once he’s in custody, and all those he worked with arrested, perhaps then you can stop finding yourself in this kind of trouble.”

Wouldn’t that be great?

“One month is all we have,” she continued on. “I know you are here now to help save the world from darkness. The good in this world needs you to fight one more time. By leading them now, when they need you the most, they will continue to fight when you step down.”

He hated her in that moment. There was hardly any time to come to terms with his *death,* yet she wanted him to *fight.* What angered him even more was that she was right. He *had* to fight. Too many people were still lost. Too many people were still hoping for justice. He knew too much to lay down and give up, even when he was dead.

“You don’t belong here, Aki. This is a place for people who have made peace with their past.”

Maybe that was what Shinji was trying to tell him. And he would change. He would tell those he could trust everything he knew and had uncovered over the years. Shido wouldn’t win. Anyone like him in the future would never win. All he would have to do is instill hope and strength to those who wanted a better world, and a better world

would follow.

A soft knock on the outer walls of his room caused all three of them to look over to the doorway. Yukari popped her head around the corner, her eyes landing on Mitsuru at first, then shifting over to him. “Someone really wants to see you.”

His heart tightened in his chest as Mitsuru nodded her head and walked over to Yukari. His doctor sighed loudly one more time. “I guess since you’re alive, it would look bad on me if I let you die now. I’ll be back to check on you in a few hours.” Then, he chuckled and shook his head. “I don’t know how you did it, Sanada, but people here love you. Maybe this was also their wish to keep you here.”

Akihiko opened his mouth to say something, but he didn’t know what. And a second later, Yukari came into the room with Minako attached to her side. When his eyes met hers, the room disappeared around him and she was the only person with him. She leaned against Yukari, crying loudly into her shoulder, then pushed off her friend and literally jumped on top of him. Her arms circled around his neck as she pressed her face into his shoulder and sobbed. All he could do was hold her as tightly as he could, unable to say anything to her, hoping his actions did the talking for him.

“I-I…I thought…I thought I would…I would never see you…again…”

Minako never sounded so afraid or broken in all the years he knew her. She sounded more like a scared child. While he had planned on telling her earlier that he was upset with her, that she had been incredibly selfish, that he didn’t *want* to be back, he never wanted to see her like this because of him. There was a difference between natural death and *murder,* and as creepy as it was, he was happy to be able to comfort her through that fear and anger she had to have felt watching him *die.*

Her arms tightened around his neck. She cried harder into his shoulder. “I love you, Aki. I love you so much…”

He missed her so much, even for that hour or two he had been conscious before she came to see him. He never wanted to be away from her, even if he was dead. He wanted to die peacefully with her,

so they would never be apart, or have to live with the sadness that came from losing a loved one.

He was stupid for being so angry with her before. He was stupid for thinking he could move on and be happy in that weird heaven or wherever he was without her. Shinji was right. He was a fucking mess, unless he was at her side.

“I-I love you, Minako.” His throat was so tight, he had no idea how he managed to say anything. He didn’t even know if she had heard him. He didn’t try again, and buried his face into her hair, letting the pain and overwhelming fear be his strength to never let her go.

“You’re alive, because she loves you.”

Now, he could only hope that his love for her kept his family safe for years to come.

Chapter 169

Chapter 169

This is the first chapter that has not been uploaded anywhere else, so thank you for being so patient with me over the almost THREE YEARS ( ) I have been writing this.

ENJOY!

It was the hardest thing she ever had to do in her life.

“Keep your back straight. Keep your eyes up.”

Makoto had to go back to school. Sae had been kind enough to stay with her for a few nights. She would take Makoto to school, pick her up from school, and pretty much take care of her after school. Her sister took over the cooking, which was basically stopping by a restaurant on their way home for take-out, trying to make a joke that she got her terrible cooking skills from their father.

The comment had made Makoto drop her food in the middle of the street and cry like she had nothing left to live for.

“I know it’s hard, Makoto, but if we don’t keep our heads up when the world expects us to crumble, then they win. And you know they are watching us right now. We have to prove them wrong.”

Makoto didn’t want to prove anyone wrong. She only wanted her dad back. And ever since Sae broke the news to her days ago, she kept hoping it was all a lie. That he was recovering somewhere. She would see him again. She had to…

After so many days of telling herself that, Makoto began to realize it wasn’t a lie, nor was it a dream, and her dad was really gone

forever.

“Keep your back straight. Keep your eyes up.”

She couldn’t even do *that* , which brought more tears to her eyes. Her dad would be so disappointed in her, but hopefully he would understand, too.

The cycle would repeat over and over, with Sae taking her to school, to picking her up, to getting dinner, to crying against her sister’s shoulder until she fell asleep on the couch. Her only shining ray of light had been the two times she had been allowed to visit Ren after school. Once had been for a meeting, but she arrived early enough to spend some time crying on Ren’s shoulder instead of her sister’s. The second time had been another meeting, where they had discovered that Masayoshi Shido did in fact have a palace, but that was about as far as they were able to get. Ryuji had broken one of the chairs, expressing his displeasure at not getting anywhere with the final keyword, and Morgana had decided to give them another day to calm down.

Which led her to where she was now, sitting at her desk at school after the last bell, trapped in another haze and unable to find her way out.

She knew her dad would be upset with her for not standing up tall, but he was *dead*. He was taken from her before she got the chance to say goodbye. She could have helped him fight. But instead, she was so excited to see Ren that nothing else mattered and now he was *dead*.

Had it not been for Sae constantly at her side, Makoto didn’t think she would eat or leave the solitude of the couch at home. And a part of her hated her sister for not letting her drown in her sorrow and disappear from the world.

Her phone went off on her desk. It was the usual message from Sae, telling her she was on her way, and if she needed to stay at school to finish any work, she would wait for her outside. Makoto slowly pushed herself up, feeling as if she was only going through the motions, and started to head outside. She was sure her excuse

of being extremely sick would only work at school for another day or two, since the students didn't know about her relationship with Ren, nor did they know her father had even been alive. Ann and Haru had been helping keep the attention off of her, as well as stepping up to help her council stay on track. Apparently, Haru could be very intimidating when she wanted to be.

Everyone was helping her, and yet, she still felt like there was nothing to be happy about anymore.

Sae wasn't outside when Makoto reached the gates. It wasn't the first time she had to wait for her sister, so she took a seat on one of the nearby benches. She just sat there, her eyes on the phone in her hands. Students walked around her without her even being aware they were there. How could the world continue on when their only ray of hope was *gone?* Her dad probably saved each of them, in some way or another, and no one would ever know. Or maybe they would when the world fell at the hands of those trying to destroy it…

"Makoto."

The voice she didn't recognize. It wasn't Sae, since it had been a guy's voice. It wasn't Ren, because he wasn't allowed to be outside of Leblanc. It could have been one of her council members, or one of the students, or…

Makoto felt her spinning world come to a blinding halt. Akechi was standing in front of her, his eyes falling from her face to the ground by their feet. For a half a second, she didn't recognize him. "You seem rather well for someone who has tragically lost so much in such a short amount of time."

He looked remorseful, like she believed Ren killed himself, and that he hadn't *murdered* her father.

"Your father's work must have been dangerous. But Amamiya committing suicide. That was unexpected."

You killed him...

“I truly am sorry, Niijima-san. If there is anything I can do to help you, please let me know.”

He lit a fire in her heart, and it snapped something in her subconscious. She always prided herself on keeping her composure in the heat of the moment. She always tried to rationalize her actions before she reacted. She tried her hardest to stay calm whenever Akechi approached her. However…

You killed him…

He killed her father…

“I will do everything I can do find those responsible for your father’s death and-,”

“You killed him…”

The air around her thickened and threatened to crush her. Her eyes narrowed to the point she could barely see Akechi in front of her. The phone that she held in her hand cracked under the pressure. She was pretty sure her other palm was bleeding.

Then, Akechi shattered that tension like glass. “I did. And I killed Amamiya, too.” His eyes darkened. “And you’re next.”

She never got the chance to lunge at him before another figure came up behind her and wrapped their arms under hers. Her forward momentum almost lifted her off her feet as she reached out to try and grab a hold of any part of Akechi and his smug, confident self. She even tried kicking at him when her hands wouldn’t reach, but that didn’t work either. Whoever held her back did so with far more strength than she was hoping for.

“Enough, Makoto.”

“You killed him! You *killed* him!”

She was in a rage, blinded by her pain and the overwhelming sense of anger that no one *cared* that her father was *dead*. Akechi continued to smile at her with an evil, sadistic look in his eyes, and she tried to wrestle her captor off of her.

“I’ll *kill* you! You bastard!”

“Makoto, calm down.”

It was another guy’s voice, but she was far too gone to name who it belonged to. They pulled on her arms until Makoto actually winced in pain, but never let her go. Makoto tossed and turned, hoping they would release her, but then another figure came to stand between her and the boy who took her world away from her.

She would recognize that long silver hair no matter how she was feeling.

Then, in a move that startled Makoto, even in her state of mind, Sae pulled out a pair of handcuffs and slapped one on Akechi’s wrist. The other she cuffed to the arm of the bench she had been sitting on minutes ago. It all happened so fast that Akechi had been surprised by it, but Sae didn’t give her time to enjoy the moment, or strike against a powerless Akechi. She yanked her from whoever was holding her back and she was in Sae’s face before she knew it.

Her glare chilled her to the bone. “Let’s go.”

“She’s okay, Sae.”

Makoto was able to see as her vision cleared that Ken had been the one to stop her from trying to kill Akechi. He had a look of worry in his eyes, and Makoto barely heard Sae mutter something in reply. As soon as her mind wasn’t swimming and she started focusing on her breath, she saw her sister lift one fist and hit Akechi square in the face.

“You ever come close to my sister again and I’ll murder you, leave your body for your supposed friends to find, then murder anyone who comes to look for you!”

Ken was the one who had to drag Sae and Makoto away from Akechi before someone did something stupid in front of the school. Ken literally pushed both of them onto the train at Aoyama-Ichome, a stern look in his eyes Makoto had never seen until then.

“I know you’re both suffering, but you need to calm down. Killing him

is going to do nothing for either of you. And I know you both know that."

Makoto let his words sink in as the train pulled away, then she felt the weight of what she had done land squarely on her shoulders. Akechi wouldn't have done anything to hurt her where so many people were walking around. He had been there to get a rise out of her, in front of people who knew her, respected her even, and likely knew and idolized him. He had to have been very confident in himself if he could admit to not only killing her dad, but Ren, too…

At least he believed he really did kill Ren. That was good to know.

Makoto let Sae continue to pull her around, but there was a point when she came to a stop. They weren't in a station; it was too quiet. There was an odd clanking noise, some hushed voices, and it piqued her curiosity enough to finally look up and realize where she was.

Sae took her to the gym in Shibuya. Where she spent so many afternoons training with her dad.

"Get changed." Sae threw a bag to her feet, that glare still as intimidating as it was minutes ago. "Now."

If anything, Makoto felt like she owed it to Sae as a form of apology. However, she really didn't want to be in the gym. It reminded her too much of her dad. And he wouldn't be there. No matter how many times she punched the bag, or kicked at it, he would never tell her to keep going, or stretch, or that she was getting better…

But it would be a good distraction. Maybe that was why Sae brought her here in the first place. After all, they hadn't made a stop for clothes, so Sae had to have made plans to come out.

It wasn't the distraction she had hoped for. Instead of getting out of her thoughts, she obsessed over them. She hated Sae for bringing her here at all, because the bag wasn't Akechi, or Shido. Sae wasn't her dad, standing off to the side and correcting her form to make her *better*. Because he was *dead*. He would never train with her again. All the while, Akechi was allowed to roam *free* like he did the world a

favor!

“Makoto.”

Sae got to get at least one hit on him, and she could have actually arrested him. Akechi had openly admitted to killing their dad, and Ren, and he was not going to jail for it. Her fists pounded against the bag harder, trying to imagine it as Akechi’s smug face, but not getting the satisfaction of hearing his bones break under her strikes.

“Makoto.”

Hot tears filled her eyes the harder and faster she struck the bag. Her dad was dead. Ren was forced into hiding. Akechi was able to walk around Tokyo with blood on his hands while the world idolized him as a hero! And Ken and her sister had the gall to stop *her* from dishing out due justice!

“Makoto!”

Irate, Makoto turned to her sister, but instead of seeing *her,* she saw her fist. It connected with the side of her jaw, hard enough to knock her back, but not hard enough to fall over. She lifted a hand to wipe at the injury, then shot a glare to Sae.

Makoto gave herself a second to adjust to the strike, then she charged at her sister. She was in another rage, and her jabs and random kicks were proof of that. Her dad would be so upset with her, giving into an emotion rather than thinking in the heat of the moment. But he was *dead.* He was dead because Akechi killed him. And Akechi wasn’t dead because Sae wouldn’t *let* her kill him! If she could get Sae out of her way, she could kill him. She could. She *would.*

Sae landed a powerful kick to her shoulder, then her opposite foot swept her off of her feet and onto her back. Makoto hit the mat hard, her breath forced out of her lungs on impact, but as soon as she was able to, she was back on her feet. She watched Sae lift her hand to her chin, just like her dad always taught her to do. Instead of doing the same, or taking a second to *calm down,* she attacked once again.

Either she had greatly underestimated her sister, or she was too blinded by rage to land a hit. It didn't take long for Sae to have her on her back again, but Makoto refused to stay down. How could she kill Akechi if she couldn't beat Sae? She had to. She had to for her dad. He would pay for what he did!

"Makoto."

She threw punch after punch, tried her luck with a few kicks, yet nothing seemed to work. She became overly frustrated, which only made her attacks less accurate and Sae's attacks hit more often. Her sister must have grown annoyed with her, for the next second, she tripped Makoto and she fell forward, almost smacking her head on the mat. Sae didn't give her time to push herself back up, dropping to her knees and pinning her shoulders down with her arm. Makoto tried to fight her off, but to no avail. The frustration turned to humiliation, then everything hit her at once.

Her dad was dead.

She couldn't save him.

She couldn't do anything to give him any sort of peace after four days of letting the news sink in.

She was *worthless…*

"Makoto."

She gave up, dropped her weight against the mat, and cried. She was going to have to accept the fact that she would never have one last training session with her father. She would never be able to ask him for guidance. She would never be able to stand face to face with him in a police uniform and have him tell her he was so proud of her.

Lost in her despair, she didn't realize that Sae had pulled her up onto her knees and wrapped her arms around her. Her shoulder made a more comfortable place to *cry*, but it didn't magically bring her dad back. It didn't make it any easier to deal with. It didn't give her peace…

"I know how hard this must be for you, but you can't let your anger

destroy you." Makoto clung to her sister like she was five and terrified of the thunder. "You're better than this, Makoto. You *have* to be better than this." She exhaled into her hair. *"We* have to be better than this."

"H-He…H-He's…" She struggled to breathe through her sobs, but Sae must have known what she wanted to say. Her arms tightened around her and she placed a hand to the back of her head. How was she going to be able to stand and fight back when the very foundation she stood on was *gone?* Her mom would try and keep her going, if and when she woke up. Sae would try and keep her going. But there was now a hole in her heart that would never go away.

When she felt herself growing weary and a headache started to form, Sae slowly pushed her back by her shoulders. Makoto dropped her head to her chest, unable to face her sister, and extremely tired. She hadn't been able to sleep well, if at all, over the past few days. She hadn't heard anything from Mitsuru about her mother. She hadn't been able to see Ren since she left him after their last meeting. Even with Sae with her now, helping her through her hatred and rage, she still felt so alone.

"Let's get you home." Sae helped her to her feet, but between her exhaustion, her headache, and the growing numbness to her jaw and shoulder, she collapsed back against her. Sae didn't seem to mind, helping her throw on a jacket and walk out of the gym. It was cold outside, but it was nice at the same time. Her face was burning from Sae's hits and her own tears, and the colder air made her feel better.

"It's going to be okay, Makoto." The arm around her shoulder pulled her closer. Sae was a lot taller than she remembered. "I won't let anyone hurt you."

It was something her dad would tell her when she was scared. To hear it from her sister brought more tears to her eyes. She wasn't the only one hurting. In fact, she was sure Sae was suffering more than she was. Her hitting Akechi in public was a sign that she was having a hard time restraining herself, too. But just like their dad, she kept her head up. She kept her back straight. She was strong

enough to take care of *her* when she was falling apart on the inside.

Speaking to her was suddenly the hardest thing to do. “I-I…I’m so sorry…Sis…”

Sae looked down at her. “You don’t have to be sorry, Makoto.”

“I-I am.” She wiped a hand over her eyes. “I-I know you’re hurting, too… A-And yet, you can still…still take care of me…”

Sae exhaled deeply, a remorseful expression coming to her face. “I’ll never be able to tell him that I was wrong, or tell him how sorry I am for what I’ve done to him.” There may have been a thin veil of tears in her sister’s eyes, but they never fell. “But I could face him again if I stay here with you and kept you from falling behind, or kept you from acting on your anger. You saved my life, Makoto. So I promise I’m going to do everything I can to keep you safe.”

Makoto hugged her, wishing she could tell her sister that their dad was always so proud of her and never once blamed her and did all he could to protect her. It truly broke her heart that they would never get a chance to make amends, to fight together, to be *happy* together…

But Makoto was also proud of her, too. It took great strength to be able to be someone else’s support when she could have easily given up. “You sound a lot like Dad right now, Sis.”

Sae stiffened in her arms, but if she said anything, she didn’t hear it over the announcement of the train approaching. Maybe this was how she was going to find her peace, by trying to be more like her dad, just like Sae was now. Her dad would have snapped at her for crying all the time and using that as an excuse to hide.

I’ll make you proud, Dad…

I hope…

It would be hard, but he trained her well. He taught her well. It would be insulting to his memory if she didn’t fight back. With her sister and her mother, and all their friends, they would see the end of the hell that he had died trying to bring to an end.

However, Makoto realized that they were on a train heading north out of Shibuya instead of south to head home. The train was quiet, less crowded now that it was later in the day, but she didn't feel comfortable asking Sae where they were heading. She was hungry, so maybe Sae was taking her to get some food, since neither one of them had eaten well in a few days, and Makoto really didn't have the heart to cook…

Sae gently tugged on her arm a few stops later, and Makoto couldn't figure out why they made the detour. "W-Where are we going?"

Sae never stopped walking, leaving Makoto to have to walk faster to keep up. "We're going to see Mom. Mitsuru said she woke up last night."

She would *love* to see her mom again. Would she be happy to see them, or had losing their dad crushed her? Makoto knew her parents didn't see eye to eye a lot, but they loved each other. Her mom would be devastated to lose her dad. But even if their mom was sad, or angry, or depressed, Makoto had to follow Sae's example and be that pillar of strength they all needed her to be. Because her dad taught her to always keep her back straight and her eyes up…

Sae led her into the hospital lobby, then through the hallways like she knew where she was going. With hundreds of hospitals in Tokyo, why didn't they pick one closer to home? Or closer to Shibuya? She figured she could ask later.

"Ah, Niijima. What great timing."

Makoto froze in her spot, terrified that the enemy had cornered them in a hospital where her parents had been staying. The man who approached them seemed nice enough, and he seemed to know her sister…

Wait…

She had been here before. Twice. Once when her dad was shot trying to save *her,* and then back when she hurt her shoulder. The doctor in front of her wasn't anyone she remembered, but Sae knew him from how they greeted each other. Had he known her from all

the times she came to check on their dad in the hospital? Was that why they chose this hospital over any other?

“This must be the little troublemaker.”

His eyes fell to her with a grin and Makoto didn’t know what to say. Troublemaker? Was he referring to when her dad was shot in the leg? She really didn’t want to bring up such memories with the pain she was already fighting through from losing him altogether.

“Can we see her?”

The doctor nodded his head and stepped aside, pointing to one of the rooms in the hall. “I’m sure she’ll be thrilled to see you.”

Makoto once again followed behind Sae to the room where their mom was hopefully awake. They could all comfort each other. They could mourn together for the first time in days. They could pick each other up and be stronger together.

“Mom!”

Sae burst through the door, and Makoto realized then how much she was hurting, how much Sae had been her physical support while Makoto did nothing to help *her.* Their mom was awake, or somewhat awake, and Sae crossed the room to her bed before Makoto could even blink. The sight of her mom hugging her sister was something she hadn’t seen since she was young. She could only stand in the doorway, watching them cry over the horrifying scene they both had to remember for the rest of their lives.

What if she had followed her mom back to Shibuya and got caught with them? Would she have been able to save her dad and fight off Akechi? Would Akechi have pulled Sae into the Metaverse if their mom hadn’t been there at all? Was her mom taking her to Leblanc what ultimately caused her father to die?

She just wanted to see Ren, and it cost her dearly…

“Makoto…”

Hearing her name, she lifted her head and wiped the tears that

came to her eyes. Her mom looked at her and held out an arm, an invitation she was not about to refuse. She ran right into her arm and fell against her shoulder. The earlier sorrow and pain that Sae had helped her out of at the gym roared back to life in her heart. Her mom's arm around her tightened as she cried into her shirt, telling her over and over again how sorry she was for what had happened.

"How are you feeling?"

Sae sounded so much more normal than Makoto thought she would. She couldn't fault her; she was tired of crying all the time, but she couldn't be as strong as Sae was right now. She was able to turn enough in her mother's arms to be able to see her sister sitting on the other side of their mom's bed. Every now and then, Sae would run a hand under her eyes, but other than that, Makoto would have thought she was fine.

"I'll be able to leave today, hopefully." Her mom sounded tired, but there was also relief in her tone. Either that or she had lost her mind and didn't know anything anymore. "I'm so happy you are both okay."

"You scared the hell out of me." Sae's voice grew weaker. "I-I thought you were dead."

Makoto could feel a new wave of tears coming to her eyes at the sound of her sister's cracking voice. She felt her mom remove one hand from her shoulder to place it on Sae's leg. "I'm so sorry, Sae. I can't even imagine what you had to go through."

Her sister rubbed both of her eyes. "Had Mitsuru not sent help, I don't know what I would have done."

Makoto suddenly felt powerless again. She hadn't been there to help. She could have, too. She could have fought with her dad and taken down Akechi, sparing any of them the heartache that they had to endure. But she was selfish. She wanted to see Ren. Now her dad was *dead.*

"You're both here now. That's all that matters."

The bubble burst in her heart and she threw her face into her mom's shoulder to silence her cries. "I'm so sorry. I should have been there. I could have helped you. I could have saved Dad!"

Her mom pat her on the back, or Sae did, she didn't know. She didn't care. There was nothing that could change what had happened, no matter how angry she was at herself.

"Your father is alive."

Makoto was sure she misunderstood. She was crying heavily. It was hard to hear anything. But she could have sworn she felt Sae shift on the bed. "W-What?"

"He's alive."

Hearing it a second time, Makoto managed to force herself to sit up. She used both of her hands to dry her face, then she shook her head to make sure she heard the truth the *third* time. "What?"

Her mom smiled warmly at her, her hand resting softly on her own. There were tears in her eyes, too. "Your father is alive."

Her first reaction was to shoot a look to Sae. She told her he was dead. Why would she lie about that? Why would she tell her that without knowing it was *true?!* The only reason she didn't scream at her was because Sae looked equally as horrified.

"N-No…" Sae shook her head violently. "No. There's no way. I saw him kill him! You couldn't wake him up! H-He was dead!"

She was hysterical. She shot up off the bed, but her mom grabbed her hand to keep her in the room. "Sae, I know you saw what you saw. But…somehow, I managed to summon another one of those spirits to bring him back. I saw him earlier. He's alive."

Her dad really died? And her *mother* brought him back to life?

How?!

Sae still wouldn't believe it. "No! I saw the blood! I saw the hole in his damn chest! Nothing in this world could have saved him!"

“Go see him, Sae.”

There was a very uncomfortable tension that settled around them. Makoto couldn’t imagine what Sae had to have seen, and she likely would have thought her dad was dead, too. Especially since Sae didn’t understand personas like she did. But would a persona really be able to bring someone back from the dead? It was scary to think about. If that kind of power was available and found itself in the wrong hands, could someone use it to bring back terrible humans from the past?

Or had her mom just been lucky? Could she do it again?

“As soon as the doctor comes back with my papers, I can leave here.” Her mom grabbed her hand as well. “I’ll take you both to see him.”

Makoto could only stand by the bed, stunned and immobile. After a few days of crying and screaming and fighting through the pain, her dad was *alive* . If this was some sick and twisted game an enemy was playing on them, she would burn the world to the ground. Her mom could have also been hallucinating from the medication or her fatigue. Sae’s reaction seemed the most genuine, and she would never say their dad was dead unless she knew it…

She lost track of time sitting in the room. When the same doctor they ran into earlier came to speak to her mom, Makoto snapped out of her thoughts. He said something to her mom, she nodded her head, then the doctor turned to face her.

“I can take you to see your father, if you’d like.”

Her eyes lifted to Sae, who was still shaking her head in disbelief. However, a quick glance to her mom and the subtle nod of her head was all it took to look back over to the doctor. He waved for her to follow him, and with half the mind she had, Makoto managed to grab Sae’s hand and pull her along with her. She fought back for a second or two, but eventually she stopped.

Sae was never one to *not* know the truth. It may have been unbelievable and unrealistic, but it was the only way to know for

sure.

Makoto did notice the doctor had to swipe a keycard into the slot by the door to open it. He ushered them both inside and closed the door behind him. Sae was frantically pacing next to her, unable to stand still. She was breathing heavily, clenching and unclenching her hands, shaking her head and cursing beneath her breath.

She didn't have time to ask Sae if she was okay before the doctor spoke up. "I know this is hard to understand. Trust me. He *was* dead at one point. But Kirijo-san has asked us to keep this a secret. You can see him, but it would be in your best interest not to tell anyone else he's alive or make frequent visits."

Her dad really was dead, and now he was alive. She would probably live the rest of her life unable to comprehend that.

But then she saw him. He was lying in bed, hands in his hair, *breathing.* She took one step closer, trying to prepare herself for the illusion to crack, but it didn't. She took one more, and another, until her dad finally lifted his head enough to see her. She stopped in her tracks, terrified that he was going to slip away from her, but then he smiled at her, breaking the tension that had built in her heart.

"Hey…"

She hated that she was spending more of her time crying than not, but she didn't care. She rushed over to the side of his bed, but then stopped before she lunged at him. The *beep* of the heart monitor was proof he was alive. His hand reaching over to grab her wrist was *more* proof he was alive. His quiet voice was what finally sealed it for her.

"It's okay, Makoto."

And she collapsed onto the bed, her head landing squarely on his chest. He was *alive.* She could feel his heartbeat, if she focused enough, which she couldn't. His chest was rising and falling with each breath he took. His arms wrapped around her like she never thought would happen again.

She didn't care how it happened. He was *alive.*

"I didn't mean to scare you, Makoto."

Her hand grabbed at his shirt, helping to relieve some of the pressure building up in her heart. "I…I never…I never thought I'd see you again…"

"I never thought I'd see you again, either," he whispered as one of his hands pressed against the back of her head. "I'm so sorry."

He was probably just as horrified as she was, or her sister was. Having been *dead* then brought back to life had to be terrifying. He sounded scared, if she was being honest. Like he *knew* he was never going to see them again, or hold them again, or tell them he loved them…

"I-I love you, Dad…"

His grip tightened around her. "I love you. I love you so much, Makoto."

The seconds ticked by into minutes of silence. Being with her dad again made her feel like she was invincible. Everything would be okay. Nothing would be able to stop them. Anything was possible, and she couldn't wait to see how their future was going to change now that he was back in it. She couldn't *wait* to see Akechi's face when he was not only hit with the reality that Ren was alive, but now her *dad.* Her dad was *alive!*

Once she felt like she had cried enough, Makoto pushed herself into a seated position and double-checked to make sure her dad was still there. She smiled weakly when he was. "I'm so happy right now."

"I'm pretty happy to see you, too." He said it, but Makoto could feel something *off.* She started to worry that maybe he was suffering from the truth that he really had died. Did he know? Or had he thought he was unconscious or asleep? Would it be rude to ask him if he knew? Was he going to help them fight? She wouldn't blame him if he didn't want to. She wouldn't know what to do if she had experienced *death* like he had…

She tried anyway. “A-Are you going to…to be okay?”

His head fell back against the bed and she worried she should have kept her question to herself. “I was dead, Makoto. I know that. I remember falling to the ground with a bullet in my heart. I remember thinking that I couldn’t save your sister, or your mother. I would never see you guys again. And then I wake up. I-I guess it’s… hard…to wrap my head around…”

Her dad was rarely this open with her, but it hurt. He was scared, and he had every right to be. Would that ruin his relationship with her mom? Was he mad at her for bringing him back?

She looked back at him when his hand squeezed hers. “But I’m here. I have to keep fighting. I have to fight side by side with you one last time to know you’re ready to take my place.”

Makoto could only nod her head and throw her arms back around his neck. A few minutes later, she released him, remembering that her sister was with her and she hogged their dad for long enough. “S-Sis is here, too! She’s going to be so happy to see you!”

But when she turned to give Sae her time with him, she was gone.

Chapter 170

Chapter 170

Remember when I said I would have updates every 1-2 weeks? 😂😂 I'll just keep you guys on your toes...

Sae considered herself lucky that she found a bathroom before she threw up.

Akihiko was *alive.* How? She could admit to being traumatized at the time, so maybe the shot to his chest missed his heart and she didn't notice. Maybe she should have waited a day before breaking the news to Makoto, just to be sure. Maybe she was still in some sort of shock-induced coma and this was all a dream. Because there was no way…

A small part of her was relieved. She would never wish death upon anyone, especially her own family, *especially* an execution style *murder*. She may never have gotten along with Akihiko, or respected him even the slightest bit until recently, but he was alive. Her mother would be happy. Her sister would be happy…

Which brought on the unbearable reality she now found herself in. She told Makoto he was *dead,* and Sae had called into work the last few days to try and take time off and help her cope with it. Now, she was a *liar.* Makoto was going to hate her, and she really couldn't blame her. She'd be furious if someone told her Makoto was *dead* and then she saw her *breathing* in a hospital bed…

The news didn't stop with Makoto, either. While she was sure Makoto took it the hardest, some of her friends were very close with Akihiko. The blond boy, Sakamoto, and Amamiya were the ones that came to her mind. And she told Amamiya what had happened, and

now *he* would think she was a liar. But if she wouldn't have said anything, would Makoto have found out from someone else? Would she have known at all? She was bound to realize her parents weren't home and start asking questions…

It also meant that she would have to face him. It was only a matter of time before he asked to see her, she was sure of that. Assuming Makoto didn't destroy what little heart she had left, Akihiko would do it for her. It was *her fault* he was in the position he was in, dead or alive. *She* was the one who fell into Akechi's trap. *She* was the one who didn't tell her mother to get out of there. *She* was the one who cowered in fear when her mother tried to *help* him. *She* was the one who kept pushing him away and hating him and trying to rub every little victory in his face.

Whenever they met again, he would cut her down, tell her she was an idiot, and she would spend the rest of her life alone, like before, but consumed with self-hatred and guilt.

After what felt like hours, Sae forced herself to the sink to wash up. She felt disgusting, on the inside and the outside. No matter how cold the water was that she splashed on her face, it couldn't drown out the voices in the back of her head, the images of what was soon to be her future. Her eyes caught her own reflection in the mirror, and she didn't even recognize herself. She looked *dead*. A stupid, weak, and soulless shell of the person she only thought she was.

You're pathetic.

In some ways, she wondered if this was what it was like to have her heart stolen like the other Phantom Thieves' targets.

You're no better than the criminals they went after.

You destroyed the one man who tried to save you.

Your sister will hate you until you die.

You don't deserve forgiveness, or a happy future…

"Sae?"

She lost track of time sitting in the hospital bathroom, but hearing her name sent a jolt of panic down her spine. She wasn't ready to face anyone. Not now. Not feeling the way she was, or *looking* the way she was. She had been sick. She had been crying. She was *weak…*

"Sae."

A hand grabbed her forearm, but Sae refused to acknowledge it. The voice sounded like her mother, who should have still been in bed, or visiting with Akihiko and Makoto and staying away from her. All she would do was bring more harm and *death* than anything to be proud of…

"Sae, look at me."

It was a pointless fight. She ran her free arm over her eyes to dry them, then slowly turned to face her mother. There was some degree of sorrow in her eyes, but whether that was genuine sorrow or *pity*, she didn't want to know.

She expected her mother to start scolding her, or berating her, or worse yet, laughing at her weakness. When she remained quiet, her eyes searching for something in her own, Sae looked away, terrified that she would see how *miserable* she was feeling.

Her mother wasn't having it. And when she heard her sigh, Sae's heart finally shattered into pieces. "Sae, I know you're upset. I know you're terrified. I know you feel guilty about everything."

She pulled her arm from her mother's hold, turning to her in a flare of rage. "I told Makoto he was *dead!* How am I supposed to tell her I'm sorry when I spent three days trying to keep her together?! How am I supposed to face *any* of you again after I *lied* to you?! H-How am I…H-How am I..."

Her fists slammed the countertop by the sink, unable to finish her thought. She pounded the surface several more times until she felt her hands grow numb. It wasn't enough. Her heart still hurt. Her mind was still telling her she was *stupid.* Her mother was still standing at her side, waiting for the perfect moment to strike…

And strike she did.

Minako wrapped both of her arms around her, and instead of fighting her off like Sae thought she would have, she fell against her. It was odd, since she felt like a child again, but it also gave her hope. Maybe her mom wasn't mad at her, or maybe they could sit down and talk and straighten everything out like adults. Surely her mother wouldn't be as cruel as Sae had been to her entire family over the years. She deserved it, and she would accept it, but she would also try and seek that forgiveness she so desperately wanted right now.

"I-I'm so sorry…"

It was all she could say, and it was a start. A pathetic start, but hopefully it would get her somewhere. Sae figured it was acceptable when she felt the arms tighten around her. "You have nothing to be sorry for, Sae. It's okay."

How wrong she was. She had *everything* to be sorry for.

"I can't even imagine how you felt in that world. I can't even imagine how you felt after it. But if there's one thing I *do* know, it's that your sister loves you, your father loves you, and I love you."

She weakly tried to push herself away from her mother, but she was much stronger. "Why? After all I've done to you…"

There was a soft chuckle that reached her ears. "Sae, you're our daughter. Nothing in this world could ever change how much we love you."

"I destroyed your family!"

Finally, her mother pushed her back and held her at arm's length, a sharp look in her eyes and her tone. "Do you know how many times I threatened to leave your father? How many times I looked right at him and told him I was done? I was tired of him being a *coward,* or trying to convince me that his decisions would keep you and your sister safe while they were *hurting* you."

Her mother took a deep breath, and Sae could do nothing but wait for her to continue. "That day, the day he almost suffered that

mental shutdown, it never would have happened had it not been for me. I threatened him for the last time that night, telling him I was not going to let him destroy Makoto's happiness because he was *scared*, and it broke him. And had it not been for your sister, he would have died then, in that world, *alone."*

Sae knew her mother was more likely to side with her than her father when it came to the reason he was putting distance between them. She had overheard a few fights growing up that her mom threatened to take her and her sister and leave. Makoto would sometimes wake up and sit in bed with her, holding her hands up to her ears to drown out the arguments.

"Tell them to stop, Sis!"

She didn't want them to stop, because she wanted her mother to *leave.*

"Tell them to stop, Sis! Please…"

Makoto had always been the link that kept her mother from leaving. Sometimes, Makoto would cry and hug her tightly until Sae felt bad enough to face her parents and tell them to stop. When Sae got old enough to ignore Makoto's pouts, her sister would put a stop to the arguments herself.

It was a war that divided the family for *years.* Her and her mother against Akihiko and Makoto.

And it had all been for nothing…

A weak shake of her shoulders made her focus back on her mother. "Even after all the hell *I* put him through, the years I made him miserable by forcing him to make a choice that could destroy his family, he could still look me in the eyes and tell me he *loved* me." Minako gave her a soft smile. "So don't you *ever* think your father hates you when you were one of the best things that ever happened to him."

It knocked the wind out of her lungs. Would Akihiko honestly forgive her so easily? She always tried to one-up him. She always tried to

take the wind out of his sails. She always slapped his hand away when he reached out to help her. The only thing that kept her from following through on arresting him or antagonizing him had been her sister. The ten second hesitation where she asked herself how Makoto would react to her actions. She did it for her *sister*, not for *him.* Surely he knew that…

“Our annual tradition of hanging Christmas lights is coming up. I know he would love to have you there.”

As soon as the words reached her ears, Sae’s heart came to a stop. She hadn’t been to any family gathering since she was *forced* to as a child. She didn’t understand why her mother was so excited about a stupid holiday that most people didn’t even celebrate. Makoto was the one who was up at the crack of dawn to help their mother with the planning, even when she was old enough to realize Christmas was a Western tradition and a stupid one…

Sae figured her mom wouldn’t *stop* once she was gone, as she had been to the apartment Christmas mornings to see her and Makoto. It wasn’t the holiday that brought Sae over, or the tradition that she found childish, but her sister and her mother. However, they never included Akihiko until the previous year, and she all too clearly remembered how *that* day had gone.

It would destroy a chance for her family to be *happy,* so she shook her head. “I can’t…”

The smile her mother wore pushed her back into a corner. “Sae. It would mean the world to your father, even if you were there for half an hour.”

It would be rude to keep denying an invitation when Akihiko had done so much for her over the past year. Half an hour wasn’t terrible. At least, it didn’t *sound* terrible. But she knew herself well enough to know she would get cold feet last minute. He had so much to be angry with her about. He had so much he could snap at her for. He lost his *life* because of her!

“I don’t want to ruin your tradition…”

“Enough, Sae.” Her mother’s eyes narrowed at her. “I won’t force you to be there, but I know you’re just worried about how Aki and Makoto will react. And I want you to put that out of your head right now.”

After a long minute, she nodded her head. “Fine.”

Her mother beamed at her, then grabbed her arm and began to pull her out of the room. “Wonderful. Makoto may still be a little klutz, so you’ll have to be very careful around her.”

Would it be off-putting to laugh, or to continue to bring up the better memories of the past? Would it be weird for her *not* to?

“I still remember when you were trying to hang up a string of lights and you clotheslined your sister when she tried running back into the living room.”

It was nice to hear her mom sound so happy about something that happened years ago. If anything, sharing a small moment with her family again could make *her* feel better. Once she got through that initial awkwardness of returning to a home she hadn’t been a part of in *years*, maybe everything would be okay again.

Assuming nothing else terrible happened in the days beforehand…

“Mom!”

Makoto ran up to the two of them long before Sae even realized they were heading out of the hospital. She thought Makoto was with Akihiko, and to see her again after her mental breakdown brought all those fears back to the surface. But if she was going to have that happy illusion shattered, she’d rather it happen now than later.

It was a blessing that Mitsuru was standing with her, and Makoto respected the elder enough not to start screaming at her in front of her. “I would advise you to take it easy for the next few days.”

Mitsuru’s eyes landed on her, and Sae was worried she was going to tell her everything was a lie, or that she could no longer be on their team, or know anything about anything…

“I would like to offer you a deal, Sae.”

She swallowed hard. Her mom wrapped her arms around Makoto, and she was suddenly jealous it couldn’t be her when she was *terrified* of what Mitsuru was going to tell her.

“I want you to work with me. As you are no longer safe in the environment you are working in, I would like you to consider leaving and joining our team.”

It was not at all what she expected. Working for the state had been her career for years, a place that had given her stability when she was anything but. A place that gave her something to strive for, to better herself…

It may not have been a smooth road, or a good one, and Mitsuru’s offer was very tempting. Not only would she be *safe,* she wouldn’t be given the runaround when she wanted to know something. She wouldn’t have to pull teeth to do her *job.* She wouldn’t have to face the harsh reality that she had wronged so many people in her career…

“I-I can’t…”

Mitsuru opened her mouth to argue her point, but Sae held up a hand. Where her rush of strength came from, she had no idea, but she embraced it. “I appreciate it, but I can’t. As of now, it’s my job to bring criminals to justice. If I walk away from everything now to keep myself safe, no one will be safe. I have to right the wrongs I’ve created. I have to fight through the corruption to give victims a sense of closure after years of nothing being done. I *have* to stop him.”

Her own words shook her to her core, but it was true. She owed it to her sister, to Akihiko, to their friends, to the families that had been affected by a man who was untouchable. It was her *job* to see him pay for his actions, to help bring peace to the victims that never thought anyone could stop him. She knew better than to think she could do it alone, but Akihiko had been fighting like hell to do the same. She refused to let the truth be buried with the attempt on his life.

Akechi would pay dearly for what he had done.

Shido and all of his accomplices would pay dearly.

Once it was all over, maybe then she could reevaluate her future. For now, her path was clear.

When no one said a word, she worried she had said too much, or was a fool to reject Mitsuru's offer to leap back into the fray with the enemy. However, while everyone was quiet, she was greeted with three warm smiles that spoke louder than their words would have.

It helped to strengthen her resolve. It also helped remind her that she wouldn't be alone.

"You know," her mother breathed out a laugh, leaning against Makoto like she had lost a fair amount of energy. "You remind me so much of your father right now."

The comparison would have normally upset her, but now, it filled her with pride. Makoto even nodded her head, slowly pulling away from her mother and coming to stand in front of her.

"I want to help you, Sis." Instead of anger or disappointment flashing in her eyes, Sae could only see the image of the little girl who always did her best to support her. "With all of us working together, I know we can do it."

It was a breath of fresh air. Sae couldn't even remember the last time she felt like this. Light, strong, determined, for all the *right* reasons. It was a wonderful feeling, and not even the small bubble of fear about her safety could make her feel any different.

"We will continue our fight as well," Mitsuru added, placing a hand on Makoto's shoulder. "I would like you to come with us to discuss more details while your father gets more rest. I will have Fuuka set up a video call with the others. We all must be on the same page and get started immediately."

Before they could all make it out the hospital doors, her mother turned around in a panic. "N-No. I-I can't…I can't leave. I-I can't leave him here!"

Her change was drastic enough that it made Sae jump in her place. Mitsuru was the one who reached out and stopped her from taking off back down the hall. “Minako, he’s going to be fine. His doctor is the only one who has access to his room. He needs to stay here until we know it’s safe for him to leave undetected.”

Her mother pulled her wrist away. “No!”

“M-Mom…”

If anyone was going to be able to help, it was her. Sae knew exactly how she was feeling; that image of Akihiko laying on the ground, bleeding out, *dead*, was one she was not soon to forget. Minako was likely worried that if she walked away, it would all be a dream, or he would suffer from some sort of complication and die again…

“Mother, stop.” Sae grabbed the same arm Mitsuru had and pulled on it hard enough that her mother turned to face her. The fear and horror in her eyes had been the same expressions she saw in her own reflection less than an hour ago. “I know you’re worried. I know how difficult it must be to walk away, but we need you at home. I can’t take care of Makoto by myself.” She tried to smile, even if the act was still weird for her. “After all, she *is* a klutz and a troublemaker. The more eyes on her, the better.”

Whether or not it was appropriate to say such things when her mother was freaking out, it worked in her favor. Minako crushed her in a hug, catching her by surprise, but it wasn’t unwelcome. Makoto huffed angrily behind her, muttering something about how she had grown up and was *not* a child anymore. Her mother cried against her shoulder and Mitsuru stood in front of her.

“The more I speak with you, the more of Akihiko I can see in you.” She put a hand on Sae’s arm with a growing smile. “I never thought the day would come where I could see you two working together.”

To be working *with* Akihiko instead of *against* him was still hard to wrap her head around. However, he had information she didn’t. She had the information he had yet to find. It would be kind of nice to be able to put it all together and have everything make *sense.*

First, she had to take care of her mother. With a little help from Makoto, she was able to escort her from the hospital to the train station. Minako continued to tell them to stop, but she barely put up a fight. It tore her apart, seeing her mother like this, but Sae was quick to shake it off and carry on. Akihiko would be okay. She would stay with her mom until she felt better. She owed her that much. Her coworkers and her boss wouldn't miss her for another day.

But as soon as they were sitting on the train, her mother leaned against her and she thought she fell asleep. It was a relatively quiet ride, and she was not about to wake her, even if it took ten minutes to arrive at Ebisu. Minako fought against them when they were leaving the station, trying to go back to the hospital, but her and Makoto were able to convince her to head home.

It had been a long time since Sae was in that apartment with her mother, and when she crossed the threshold, she suddenly felt out of place. When it was just her and Makoto, her mind had been focused on keeping her sister from drowning in her sorrow. With her mother there, she was reminded that this wasn't *her* home. Did she need permission to enter? Or sit down? Or go to the kitchen to get something to drink?

Minako, however, ran right off into the kitchen, as if reading her mind. Mitsuru and Makoto took their seat on the couch, but Sae followed after Minako to make sure she was okay. The walk from the doorway to the kitchen felt like hours, but then she found her mother pulling glasses out from the cupboards and rummaging around in the fridge.

"D-Do you need help?"

Minako shot up from behind the door of the fridge, and Sae knew she was trying to keep herself together. There was a frown on her face that told her she was still upset, and scared, but she would be strong. When she spoke, she sounded much more normal than how she appeared. "I'm afraid we aren't coffee drinkers, and we usually stick to water or tea when your father isn't here."

Conversations were going to be difficult for a while, she assumed, given she didn't know how to *respond* now. She settled for what she

thought was acceptable. “Tea is fine.”

Minako clapped her hands together. “Good. Your father used up all of the coffee and I haven’t gone out to get more, to get him to slow down. He drinks almost four cups a day.”

A lump began to form in her throat, but either her mother noticed and grabbed her arm as a distraction, or she didn’t and needed her help. Making a few cups of tea for everyone sounded like a weird way to try and reconnect with her mother, but it helped calm her down. They didn’t speak unless it was necessary, and it was a job one of them could have done alone, but she found comfort in her presence. Like she always had growing up. Like she hoped she could continue to have in the future.

“I really am sorry, Sae.”

The apology caught her off guard. “W-What do you mean?”

Minako kept her eyes on the kettle on the stove, but her frown deepened. “He was dead. And instead of getting you to safety like I should have, all I could think about was him and how I knew I could save him. I put you through hell. I put your sister through hell. I put *him* through hell.”

She felt a crack in her heart. “I-I may not understand how it was possible…b-but, I should thank you.” Minako still didn’t look at her and the air began to thicken around them. “M-Mom…You gave me another chance to sit down and talk to Akihiko about our past. I don’t deserve to have this after everything I’ve done, yet you gave it to me anyway.”

Minako lifted a hand to her eyes, but Sae remained where she was. “I-I wish I could tell you…what having you here means to me…what it means to this family…”

She took two steps forward to place a hand on her mother’s arm. “You don’t have to tell me. I already know.”

Her mother looked straight into her eyes, a smile lighting up her face, and even the room. She hoped she got to see her mother’s

smile more often. “I’ve missed you so much.”

When Minako hugged her again, Sae swore that she would never take her family for granted again.

Chapter 171

Chapter 171

I really, really, REALLY, didn't like this chapter. But I feel like I needed it to fill in some gaps and carry on to the next chapter. I'm sorry

Also, for the record, I have about 12 more chapters to write to finish this story. I'm just being super lazy about posting in case I need to fix something in an earlier chapter

Enjoy!

Ren wouldn’t consider himself an angry person by any means, but given the last few days, he found himself needing to take breaths to calm himself down.

He hated the fact that there was little he could do for Makoto and her sister. The Phantom Thieves were at least able to discover that Shido did have a palace, but that was about as far as they got. While it was nice to be able to step back outside in the real world instead of remaining in his attic hideout, he wished it could have been under different circumstances.

The Diet building was as far as he was allowed to go. Taking Makoto home or walking around the block with her just to *be* with her was something he couldn’t afford to do now. It angered him to have to say goodbye to her when she was so *upset* and he couldn’t be there for her when she needed him.

Morgana had told him it was a great time to rest and recover so he was ready when they found Shido’s last keyword. His injuries hadn’t fully healed, but he no longer needed the medication to help him deal with them. The bruises were fading. The cuts were healing. But

the one thing that was far from normal was his heart. He didn't think he would feel better anytime soon, but he had to be strong. For his team. For Makoto and her sister. And for her father.

It was hard to believe that Sanada was really dead. It seemed that at every corner when Ren thought he was going back to jail or he was backed against a wall, Sanada helped him out. He had helped Ryuji when no one would bother to listen to him. He had reached out to Futaba to find out the truth about her mother. If Sanada wouldn't have done anything for his friends, maybe he would still be alive…

"Ren."

Right. He didn't have time to be dragging his feet. They had work to do. He made a promise to Makoto that morning that he would do anything he could to help her capture every last bad guy her father had been trying to find. He didn't care if that meant putting himself in danger from being found out. He didn't care if that meant he had to come face to face with hundreds of evil men. He refused to cower. He refused to hide. He refused to *give up.*

"Sorry." His attention shifted to Morgana, who was sitting on his desk in front of him. He'd been trying to do some reading to make up for his absence in school when he received a text from Mitsuru asking him if it would be okay to meet that day. The plan was to separate into groups to keep eyes off Leblanc, so he would meet with Futaba, Haru, and Yukari. Ken and Fuuka would take Ryuji and Ann to Kosei to pick up Yusuke and hold their meeting in their car. Mitsuru would be with Makoto, and somehow, the computer geniuses would be able to link them all through video chat.

It would be the first time they would have a meeting with no one really around. However, it was also the first time in days that Mitsuru had contacted him about catching up. Had there been a new development? Is that why she wanted everyone to be separated? Was Akechi on to them?

His book was far from interesting after that message. Thankfully, Morgana distracted him by forcing him to make more supplies they would need in the Metaverse. They would be ready when the time came. They were already losing precious hours, and he would not

be forced to leave a palace because they didn't have enough supplies.

A short while later, Ren heard quiet footsteps making their way up to his room. It was about that time for Futaba to head over, but she was usually so rambunctious and excited when she came to a meeting. She liked to show him the cool software upgrades she had made to her computer (he never understood it, but he always patted her on the back). She liked to map out her best plan of action for her next trip to Akihabara so she could avoid as many people as possible, but see as much as she could.

Now, that energy was gone. When Futaba stepped into view, her head was down, her arms loosely carrying her laptop, and a frown was on her face. Morgana hopped off the desk to approach her, and Ren pushed his chair back to sit next to her on the couch she claimed as her own. He placed an arm over her shoulder, and she immediately threw her face into his chest. He gave her a few minutes to cry, because he sure as hell wasn't going to tell her she couldn't, but eventually, he was able to pry her off of him to look into her eyes.

"Futaba, it's going to be okay. The more time we sit here and do nothing, the more the bad guys are going to win."

She ran one hand under each of her eyes, followed by a few sniffs. "Y-Yeah…"

It didn't bring back her cheery personality. Ren had to watch with a heavy heart as Futaba opened her computer and began to slowly do something. She rubbed her eyes from time to time, but at least she kept pushing forward.

Futaba's fingers came to a stop on the keyboard. "D-Do you really think…that we can do this…?" She kept her eyes on the screen, but the fear and sadness in her tone broke his heart. "They killed him. H-He's dead! How can we fight against someone like that?!"

If he wavered now, his team would fall apart. It was scary; he'd be the first person to admit that. But he had to fight back. He wouldn't let his fear keep him from doing anything, even if it was hard. He

didn't want his friends to do something they didn't want to, but if they were to bring down Shido and all the people he worked with and restore faith to their city, they had to stick together.

"I know it's hard," he finally said. "I'm scared out of my mind, too. But if we let them win now, then why did we come this far at all? If we let them win now, then everything Sanada did for us will mean nothing. I will never force you to come with us if you don't want to, but I have to. And in order to defeat them, I need all the help I can get."

Futaba sat quietly beside him, fingers unmoving and facial expression unchanging. He couldn't imagine what she was going through, losing that connection and hope to get justice for her mother. However, he really needed her help. She had been an invaluable asset to their team. And if she truly wanted to see the end of this for her mother's sake, she had to find that strength on her own.

As soon as that thought crossed his mind, Futaba began moving again. She typed much faster than she had moments ago, and her eyes narrowed in concentration. Despite the fact she was still far from her usual self, Ren felt a smile forming on his lips.

"I have a lot to prove," he heard her whisper beneath her breath. "I've always sat hiding behind my computer, knowing no one could catch me and hurt me. I'm not like you, able to fight on the front lines and not be scared. But I know the truth. I would never be able to live with myself if I didn't do anything to help."

She continued to type away, like she would normally do before the rest of their group showed up. He was more than willing to give her that time to herself, and not to break her concentration now that she was focused again. He was proud of her, knowing she was stepping out of her comfort zone to finally put an end to the hell that had surrounded her for years.

In a way, it was terrifying. But he was also ready. They would get their answers. They would find peace. They could go back to living normal lives again.

Yukari and Haru joined them several minutes later. It was weird to

be missing so many of the team while welcoming one of Minako's friends, but the more time they spent with the older group, the more Ren enjoyed them. They were keeping them safe, fighting a battle they didn't start, even after losing a comrade. It made him realize once again who all they were working with, how strong they all were together, and he had nothing to be afraid of.

Haru took a seat on the couch next to him. "How are you feeling?"

It was a difficult question to answer. He was tired. He was a little sore. He missed Makoto terribly. Akechi took another life. He was anxious to start fighting and ending this nightmare for him and his friends.

He tried to at least put her at ease when he was quiet for too long. "A little bit of everything, if I'm being honest."

"Your injuries seem to be healing well." Yukari pulled out a chair to sit across the table. "I know it's hard, but don't push yourself. There's plenty of us to help carry some of that weight now."

He appreciated the gesture, but he wouldn't sit back because he was hurt. He had far too much to fight for.

"The connection is up and running!" Futaba lifted a fist in the air, her voice slicing through the tension that was slowly building around them. "Hello? Can you hear me?!"

Futaba's demeanor was a relief to his heart. When her face lit up after Fuuka and a random icon he presumed to be Mitsuru's feed popped up on her screen, he let out a quiet laugh. The energy Futaba gave the room was a wonderful change for everyone. It was also nice to hear Ryuji gasp in awe at the technological knowhow of three different people in three different parts of Tokyo.

Futaba situated her computer on the table so everyone could see the screen. Ren assumed it would have been similar to a conference call, but he had never used a video chat before. He figured since their group were in *three* different locations, it wouldn't be possible.

He should never doubt the powers of technology. "We are all here!"

Ren chuckled to himself when Ryuji and Yusuke's face filled the left side of the screen. "Woah. Dude. There's a camera in there!"

"You both act like you've never been inside a nice limousine!"

"I have lacked the funds for such adventures."

"Hey! Ren! I can see you, man!"

Haru giggled into her hand. Futaba leaned into the camera. "Knock it off!"

"It's good to see you are all in high spirits, but we don't have a lot of time." He felt bad for goofing around, as minimal as it was, when they had work to do. Mitsuru didn't sound like she was upset with them, so that was nice at least. However, he really wanted to see Makoto, or at least hear her voice. He hadn't been able to see her that day, but Mitsuru's group must have just been a voice feed. He tried not to look disappointed for the others to see.

"How are you feeling, Amamiya?"

He gave Mitsuru a different answer than what he had given Haru minutes ago. "I'm doing okay, I guess."

Then, like a sign from the gods, he heard Makoto's voice. "Are you resting, Ren?"

Yukari and Haru picked up on his happiness immediately. "Well, I'm trying not to go stir crazy by reading, so yes?"

He could have sworn he heard a faint laugh. "I'll bring you some homework after school tomorrow to keep you busy."

Makoto sounded very…different. Not *happy*, but…content? Relaxed? She had been such a wreck the few times he had seen her since her sister broke the news to her about her dad. Ren didn't expect her to stay down and depressed forever, but to bounce back this quickly? Maybe her mom was better? Maybe her sister had helped her cope with their loss in a way Ren never would have been able to?

“You haven’t been able to enter Shido’s palace, correct?”

Did Mitsuru know the final word? Or did she just need to know? If he told her they had not and they were stumped, would she let him talk to Makoto again?

“There’s nothing you can remember about that night you pulled him off that woman?”

It was Sae. He hadn’t expected her to be there, but it meant she was with Makoto, and maybe that was why she was feeling better. Plus, Sae had valuable information that he hadn’t yet relayed to his friends, worried that it was an unnecessary push after Makoto told them Shido had her father killed. Now, it would be a great time to get everything out into the open for everyone to *know.*

However, he didn’t have anything to offer Sae. “I-I don’t remember much. He was saying something about how he owned the police, that he would control Japan, but that’s all still blurry.”

“Wait.” He saw Ryuji shake his head several times. “Y-You *know* him?!”

He didn’t want to say anything about what Sae had told him about Shido being the man who threw him in prison. Ryuji was already losing his mind knowing that Shido was the one who plotted Sanada’s murder, so telling him he also had *him* arrested would be too much. There was little he could do now except tell everyone about that night. Even now, much of it was a haze, and the high-pitched screech gave him a headache when he tried to remember more about it, but either his friends took it rather well or there was a storm about to erupt…

Ryuji was the first one to explode. “Oh, hell no!”

“Calm down, Ryuji.”

Ren saw Ken reach for Ryuji’s arm to keep him from hitting his head on the roof of the car. The elder held a finger to his lips, and thankfully Ryuji stopped shouting. He was pissed, but silent.

“So he wants to control Japan,” Yusuke said to keep the

conversation on topic. “Do you think the shape of his palace is something one can physically control?”

“He has a stranglehold over the police…”

“He controls people…”

“The subway, maybe? Since Tokyo would be lost without them…”

“I am *the police, boy!”*

Ren grabbed his head, the ringing in his ears slightly painful.

“I prefer to take the bus.”

“You cannot stop me! I will steer this country in the way I *want it to go!”*

The ringing stopped. His mind was clear. It was weird, almost like he was finally remembering something important . “He wants to steer the country in a singular direction. He said that. I remember him saying that now.”

“Something he can steer in one direction?”

“Like a car?”

“No one talks about steering cars…”

The answer suddenly hit him like a mallet. “A ship.”

Futaba squealed loudly. “That’s it, Ren! That has to be it!”

“We’re a few blocks away from the Diet building,” Fuuka replied. “We will let you know if it works!”

“Don’t go in!” Futaba grabbed the computer like it was a human hand. “It would be dangerous!”

Ken smiled with a shake of his head. “Nah, we won’t. Fuuka is pretty good about sensing the Metaverse without being in the Metaverse at all.”

Huh.

“That’s how we were able to find Minako and Sae…”

Ren felt the shift in the mood, but just as quickly as it changed, Fuuka broke right back through it. “It works, Amamiya-kun. This is how we can access the palace!”

He exhaled a sigh of relief. Now, they could get right to work.

“He’s a very dangerous man. How can you think that *children* are going to be enough to bring him down?”

“Sis…”

Before Ren could tell Sae that they were very well equipped to deal with the new task, Mitsuru spoke up first. “Who said anything about the children fighting alone?”

“Hell yeah!” Ken pulled a very Ryuji-like move and slammed his fist into his palm. “I’ve been ready for this since I summoned my persona weeks ago! I’ll be there for sure!”

“We may not be much,” Yukari added. “And we may not all go with you into the Metaverse every time, but we’re going to find everything we can on everyone involved. This intel business is what we’re good at.”

“I want to go.”

It was the first time he had heard Minako’s voice in days. It caught him by surprise, not at all thinking she was even there, but she continued. “I have my powers back. I’m not going to sit on the sidelines any longer. I have to do this.”

Her conviction tore right through his heart. He wanted to tell her no, that it was okay, that Makoto would murder him if he let her come with them and she got hurt. Even if a small part of him was curious to know how she got her powers back, what that all meant, if Igor was going to snap at him whenever he pulled him back into the Velvet Room…

“Ken, Yukari, and Minako will accompany you to help you cover more ground. Fuuka will be able to assist Sakura to keep everyone in contact. Junpei is going to keep us posted about the police. Since you’re planning on returning to work, Sae, Aigis will stay with you. However…”

A pause. Ren may not have known Mitsuru all that well, but she was never one for hesitations. Or at least, not before she brought up something *bad.*

“What I am about to tell you needs to stay between us.”

He could have sworn his heart was about to pop as he looked at his group members, then nodded his head. He had no idea what Mitsuru would find so secretive that she had to *warn* them before she said anything…

“Akihiko is alive.”

The tension swirling around in his stomach came to a violent halt. Did he hear her right? Sanada was *alive?* How? Why would Makoto’s sister tell them he was *dead* if it wasn’t true?

“I brought him back.” It was a miracle he had been able to hear Minako’s voice over his own confusion and Ryuji’s loud gasps. “I-I was able to…to save him…when I...when I got my powers back...”

Ren shook his head and cursed under his breath. He couldn’t even begin to imagine how Sae had felt, or how terrified Minako was. He didn’t think Sae was a liar, and he likely would have reacted the same, even with his knowledge of their supernatural powers. Had that been the final push Minako needed to break that barrier and call out to her personas? Could a persona really bring someone back from the dead?

“I’m so sorry for lying to you, Amamiya.”

“He was dead,” he thought he heard Minako say. His head was still spinning and it was difficult to understand what was happening. “I didn’t even know he was alive until I woke up. If Sae wouldn’t have said anything to you all, you would have found out from someone

else."

Now he had to say something. "No, it's…it's okay.. I would have thought the same thing…" Ren took a breath to help settle his mind. "It's just…difficult to understand, I guess. But I'm also relieved."

"Can our powers really bring someone back to life?"

Ren could feel the tension between everyone, and half of his team was split into two other locations. Mitsuru was the one who broke the silence first. "I'm not sure. This is the first case of a true resurrection that I've been aware of. I know it's a surprise, and I cannot provide you with answers, but it wouldn't be fair to keep this from all of you."

From their reactions, Ryuji and Futaba couldn't believe what they were hearing. *He* still couldn't believe Sanada was alive. Granted he hadn't been there, would never *want* to have been there, the heartbreak in Sae's voice when she told Makoto was genuine. Any normal person under any normal circumstances would have died. No questions asked. And even if he had been there, knowing everything he had known, Minako had lost her powers. Sanada should have been *dead…*

But, now that the news was out, he felt stronger. That had to have been why Makoto sounded so confident. It must have been why everyone was coming together, because three separate parties had three different degrees of information, and it was time to put it all into one place.

Mitsuru's voice pulled him from his thoughts. "Akihiko has never been one to remain down for long, and since Minako is adamant about going to the palace, he will likely wish to go as well."

Ryuji, who had been silent to let the reality of the situation sink in, finally hollered in delight. "Hell yeah! I have been waiting for this! We're gonna tear some shit up!"

Regardless of the good news, it was likely still hard for Sanada's family to cope with. Minako and Sae especially would be scarred for life. And it wasn't like he was going to forget any time soon how

Makoto reacted to the news.

“We’ll make them pay,” Makoto said with a darkness to her tone that scared him. “They’ve messed with us for the last time.”

Should he be worried that Makoto would fight blindly because she was furious? Should he not take her with them, just in case she *did* do something irrational? He couldn’t very well rush over to see her after school one day and check up on her. He also knew that if he did bench her to keep her from getting hurt in a rage, she would rip his head off. He thought maybe it was a good thing her mother was supposed to come with them, but would she encourage violence or attempt to stop Makoto if she got violent?

Haru clapped her hands together with a smile. “I am so happy to hear everything is okay. But please don’t push yourself, Mako-chan.”

He was thankful it came from Haru and not from him. But it also reminded him that Makoto wasn’t the only one who wanted to fight. Akechi had killed Haru’s father, too. Akechi likely killed Futaba’s mother. Akechi tried to kill *him.* And Akechi likely committed these acts for Shido himself. Having some level-headed adults to help keep everyone focused and under control would help immensely. Assuming, of course, Minako and Sanada really went and *they* didn’t go overboard.

“As of right now, we believe that Shido has been working with some of your targets for years.” Mitsuru once again saved him from drowning in his own doubts. “There’s a link between him and Kaneshiro, Medjed, and Okumura. There’s a possibility he has been in contact with the principal at Shujin long before Kamoshida was employed there.”

“We found money transfers between Kaneshiro and Shido, and a wide net of other crooked people in power.” Fuuka also added, “There is also some evidence that Madarame was giving Shdio some of his profits as well.”

Something that had started out months ago as a coincidence was now anything but. It would explain why the principal had demanded Makoto find out who the Phantom Thieves were when Kamoshida

was arrested. It would explain why he threatened her after Madarame's confession. Kaneshiro was likely the tipping point, when Shido and his men realized they were more of a threat than they thought. So they set up Medjed, which boosted their popularity, used that to get them to go after Okumura, and trapped them. Since Okumura likely knew who to point the finger at, it made things *too* easy. And Akechi knew their identities, and knew Makoto wouldn't hesitate to help her sister, and planned to end them for good.

It was all so terrifyingly brilliant. Ren just couldn't understand *why* it was happening at all…

"Akihiko had been working tirelessly to put everything together." Mitsuru sighed, then continued on. "We captured his boss months ago, who had put out the hit on his family, and he was killed in a similar fashion as Okumura. Shido has eyes everywhere, has ties with far too many people, and is not to be taken lightly."

Futaba chimed in with, "The election is less than a month away. If we can change his heart before he reaches office, we could foil their plan."

"Is he really doing all of this just to become Prime Minister?" Ann asked. "And even if we do stop him, is the public really going to elect someone else? He seems extremely popular…"

Would Shido be voted as the next Prime Minister, even after a confession that followed a change of heart? Would Shido have a back-up plan in case something happened to him? Or was he really that complacent in believing he was unstoppable?

Sae spoke up next. "It's impossible to tell what the people are going to do, but Shido can't run a country behind bars."

Morgana hopped up on the table by Futaba's computer. "Plus, if we're successful, his desire to rule the country will be gone."

"That doesn't mean he won't have someone take his place who is just as corrupt as he is." Ren rubbed his hands over his face. "I don't think we have enough time to capture all of his associates before the election."

“Perhaps not,” Mitsuru replied, which made him feel bad for being so negative. Taking Shido down would be one hell of a step. The rest they could deal with as it happened. “But we can only do so much. Whatever the public decides to do, we have to accept. For now, we keep our focus on Shido. When all is said and done, I hope my team can take care of the rest.”

It was how the meeting came to a close. They had a lot to take in, and it was getting late. He wished he could have said goodnight to Makoto, got a chance to see her and wave at her and say something cute, but Futaba closed her computer before he could ask. He thought it was better left for a text, or a personalized phone call, so he grabbed his phone to do just that. He would make sure she was okay, ask if she could visit after school before they went off to the palace, and tell her he missed her and he loved her and he was so happy her dad was okay.

To his surprise, when he went to type out a message, Makoto sent him one first.

My mom needs to talk to you. I know it’s getting late, but she said it’s really important. Can we swing by?

Ren didn’t know how to react. On one hand, he could see Makoto, which was never a bad thing. On the other hand, what would Minako want to talk to him about? Her powers? Did she learn something about why she lost them in the first place? Did she beat up Igor?

All he could reply with was, *Okay,* then he spent the next few minutes trying to convince himself that there wasn’t a lump of dread settling into his heart.

Chapter 172

Chapter 172

Family Secrets is 3 years old! I can't believe it….

Anyway, enjoy!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

"Death is only afraid of the one who gives life."

Minako had a massive headache. Nothing seemed real to her. She moved about like she was in a dream, floating on through the scenes that came into her mind. The only thing that really kept her grounded was her daughter, standing off to her side, gripping her hand as if she was young and terrified of the crowds around her.

"Mom?"

Makoto was technically her bodyguard at the moment. Mitsuru had demanded her to stay indoors and speak to Ren in the morning when she could escort her, but Minako put her foot down. Mitsuru wasn't happy about it, but she let her leave with Makoto at her side after they both promised to stay out of trouble and stay together.

"And when you face God, you will know true fear."

Shido was giving her heart a run for its money, but Minako knew he was no *god.* She was hoping that by talking to Ren about what both Ryoji and Theo had told her, he could help her make sense of their words. Why would a god want to bring her harm? She had used her powers to *save* the world when she was younger. It's not like she was going to go off and destroy the world with them now. Unless this god was pissed that she had the ability to breathe life into someone

and that was not her place…

From the way Theo spoke about it, Igor saw this day coming. And if Igor was missing, maybe he was hanging out in the Velvet Room Ren visited, and Ren could ask him for her. And if Igor really did fear the nothingness that would destroy humanity, then he would have told Ren as much.

"While your valiant efforts saved the many years ago, Death fears God. Your powers will never be enough."

The only other wild card would be Ren, so perhaps he was the "light" Theo had been referring to. Why else would Igor jump into his Velvet Room if it wasn't to help guide him to strength like he had once done for her?

"Mom."

Minako blinked and the numbness subsided. She was waiting for a train, to where, she didn't know. She took the time to look around her and realized they were in Shibuya Station. The same place she found Sae talking to Akechi. The same place he pulled them both into the Metaverse. The same place he killed Akihiko. He had blood on his chest. He wouldn't wake up no matter how hard she shook him…

"Mom!"

She shook her head at the sharpness in Makoto's voice. "Sorry." Everything was okay. Akihiko was okay. Akechi wouldn't try the same trick again, knowing he was greatly outclassed against her. They all had a plan of action to take down Shido. Honestly, there was nothing she should be worried about.

But with every blessing came a curse. If Ren knew nothing about this "God", then it was her duty to at least warn him about the possible danger. Or, better yet, he could laugh her off and tell her she was losing her mind.

Maybe watching Akihiko die had taken more of a toll on her subconscious than she wanted to believe.

“Everything is going to be okay, Mom.” Makoto’s hand squeezed hers, and she was grateful for the distraction. She owed both Sae and Makoto so much. They both gave her strength when she felt herself drowning in the darkness and the blood and the *anger.* She was proud of them for not letting such a terrible time deter their ambitions. Akihiko would be so proud of them, too.

She was more than happy to get onto the train and get out of the station. When it pulled away, Minako felt so much lighter, less sick, less *terrified.* Was that where this god was waiting for her? If Makoto hadn’t been with her, would he have taken her out? Or would it not spare anyone to get to her?

Was anyone safe that she knew? Or was she a little too paranoid?

Makoto pulled on her hand when they arrived at Yongen-Jaya, and Minako forced herself to focus. It was getting late. Makoto had school in the morning. Ren was still recovering. They needed their rest if they wanted to make decent headway into Shido’s palace the following afternoon. She wouldn’t hold either of them up over some crazy story that may or may not be true.

The walk from the station to the coffee shop was short and uneventful. It didn’t stop Makoto from checking all of her surroundings with every step she took. She only relaxed when they were both inside the shop and the owner smiled politely at them.

“’Fraid I need to get home, but stay as long as you need to.”

Minako bowed her head, suddenly regretting coming out here at all. “I-I’m sorry to bother you.”

Sojiro waved his hand like he had insulted her. “Nonsense. I just finished cleaning stuff up after closing shop. The boy knows how to lock up after you. Help yourself to whatever you need.”

He put on his hat and nodded his head to her, then walked out of the door. Makoto wasted no time in dragging her to the back of the room and up the stairs. Given her mindset the past few days, Minako forgot that Makoto was likely still worried about Ren’s health. Had she been able to see him over the past few days, or was she not

allowed? She seemed awfully eager to see him again…

“Ren!”

There was a sharp pain in her heart when she watched her daughter run up to where Ren stood from the couch and almost tackled him back onto it. What if Ren would have died that day, all alone, and the last thing he saw was a gun pointed at him? Would Akechi have found Makoto and told her in graphic detail how he did it, just to get under her skin? Would her daughter have the same images in her head that came to hers whenever she closed her eyes…

“Do you want to sit down?”

Minako shook her head again to get rid of the sickness forming in her stomach. Akihiko was alive. She saw him. She spoke to him. Mitsuru would call her if anything were to change. Instead of answering Ren’s question, she sat down on the closest chair she could find. She had to make this quick. Then she could go see Akihiko to make sure he really was alive…

“I’m sorry to come over on short notice,” she finally said, hoping her voice sounded as strong as she wanted it to be. “But I just had a question that I thought only you could answer.”

Ren returned to his seat on the couch with Makoto sitting right next to him. Her heart felt a little lighter when she watched Makoto lean against his shoulder and his hand grabbed one of hers. “Of course.”

She didn’t want to waste any more time. “Does Igor ever talk about…a god?”

Ren’s reaction was all the answer she needed. “A…A god?”

“I saw Theo, when I was unconscious.” His eyes widened. “He told me that the Igor from my Velvet Room was gone, and that he had always talked about how humanity would be swallowed by darkness. How Death fears God, and as I carry Death with me, this god has to eliminate me.”

Now that she said it out loud, it sounded ridiculous. Why would God want people to suffer in darkness? Was that the world he wanted? It

didn't make sense…

Ren and Makoto spared each other a look, then he moved his eyes back to her. "It's weird, because I think something is wrong with Igor when I talk to him. Ever since I mentioned you, he's been…cranky? The twins have been a little off, too."

Minako didn't know what that meant, but maybe it was something to be hopeful about? "He's been cranky?"

"I haven't been back to the Velvet Room since I was captured, but I'll see how he reacts to you having your powers back."

Then, she changed the subject and asked, "What's your Velvet Room like?"

He hesitated, his back straightening in his seat. She hadn't meant for the question to be offensive; she was just curious. She noticed his hand tightened around Makoto's, so she figured it was too forward of her to ask.

"I-I'm sorry, Ren."

"Don't be," he said with a shake of his head. A look of pain flashed across his face, but he took a deep breath and released it slowly before opening his mouth. "It's a jail."

His answer caught her off guard. "A jail?"

"It's what I'm afraid of the most, being back in a cell, locked up and unable to live."

Her heart came to a complete stop.

"Your fear of the abyss that claimed you is now what claims this space."

But if Ren was with Igor, then why was he also facing his deepest fears when he entered it?

"W-What did you mean by, you carry Death?"

Her attention was pulled back to the two sitting in front of her. Makoto looked confused and horrified. However, this had always been taboo to talk about. Death, Ryoji, the battle with Nyx and the unclear memories that came after. Minako never imagined she would have to talk about it again, but she had to now.

So she did. She talked about the accident that claimed the lives of her parents. She talked about the first night she returned to Iwatodai and unknowingly experienced the Dark Hour. How she first met Pharos and how she first summoned her persona. Then, she talked about Ryoji, his revelation that he had been Death, and a part of her for years. She described the battle with Nyx, or Ryoji, or *Death,* the best she could remember, and how that led to her falling into a coma and living in darkness for another year.

Makoto only gaped at her. Ren seemed just as surprised. The cat she didn't even know was there scared her half to death when he spoke up. "So you're saying that because you've awakened to your powers, and one of them is Death, that God wants to destroy you?"

"T-This is crazy, Mom!"

"Maybe he's just upset that I played God to bring Aki back…"

"N-No…" She expected Makoto and Ren to think she had lost her mind, but Morgana was the one who seemed to be taking her seriously. That made *her* think she lost her mind. "There's something…I can't…quite…remember…"

Ren dropped his eyes to the cat sitting by his feet. "Are you okay?"

Morgana shook his head. "I'm fine. But hearing something about humanity swallowed by darkness…I've heard it before, I think…"

A hand flew to her mouth. "R-Really?"

"Morgana can't remember much about his past," Ren said once the silence got too heavy. "We believe there's a part of Mementos that will help that, but each level is more twisted and difficult than the one before it."

"There's something down there," Morgana added. "The train we see

at the entrance always heads *down.* We don't ever see it coming *up* with people on it. *"*

Her heart started racing in her chest. "Wh-What's down there?"

"We don't know." Morgana lowered his eyes, either contemplating or afraid. "Whatever is down there is the most dangerous aura I've ever sensed."

What was always at the bottom of a long, dangerous dungeon?

The abyss…

The one thing she feared more than anything…

"My master spoke of this day long before I met you. How humanity would lose their way. How the darkness would claim the land. There would be no death. There would be no life. There would only be nothing. The hell you experienced once before would become the world."

If God was anywhere, it was in the abyss. He could grab her and pull her down, or he could expand his range and ensnare everyone she loved. And if Death was afraid of God, who lived at the bottom of the world, Death would live as far away as he could…

Like at the top of Tartarus…

Maybe that was why the headaches were always the worst in Mementos. Maybe that was one of the reasons why she passed out after saving Akihiko. If Mitsuru wouldn't have gotten them out, would God have come for her? Or Sae?

She was pulled from her thoughts when Makoto started to laugh. "T-This is crazy. Y-You really think that *God* is going to kill my mom because she has a persona? S-She's not *killing* with it like Akechi is!"

"I'll see how Igor takes it when I see him again." Ren slowly nodded his head, trying to assure her they'd figure something out. "If you learn anything else, let us know."

Morgana copied Ren's actions. "Right, but our main goal right now is to deal with Shido. Hopefully God can stay quiet long enough so we can keep him from office."

Of course. Minako hadn't expected them to sit down and develop a plan, much less have them *believe* her. Makoto continued to shake her head in disbelief. Ren was at least trying to calm her down. Morgana, oddly enough, was the one that walked up to where she sat, his eyes down, and a sad look on his face. Was that even possible for a cat?

"Mementos has been the key to me regaining my memories. Do you think that's where he is hiding?"

It felt strange to voice her opinions to a *cat.* "I-I don't know. But when we fought Ryoji, we were at the top of the world at the time. And if he was truly afraid of God, he would be as far away from him as possible, right?"

"Isn't this all a little, far-fetched?" Makoto continued to shake her head, as if the action would bring everyone to their senses. "You said that back then, Death wanted to rid humanity of its free-will, their hearts, their everything. But then you think *God* wants to do the same thing now?"

Maybe she really was losing her mind. However, to her surprise, Ren came to her defense. "In mythology, Nyx was a mother, sometimes dark and angry, sometimes loving and nurturing. Thanatos may be Death, but some people actually thought he was an innocent soul. So maybe God doesn't want to eliminate Death because it's *bad,* but because Thanatos is powerful, kind, and a threat to *his* power."

Minako had nothing to say to him. Not only was she impressed with his knowledge, but in a way, it made sense. She never once felt disgusted or evil about carrying Pharos or Thanatos around with her. Ryoji was far from scary himself. The battle with Nyx was a little more intimidating, but they were there to kill, and it could have been a natural defense of a mother…

"Death comes in many forms, my dear. You shouldn't always be

afraid of it."

And if she knew anything about gods in general, they were all selfish assholes that humans worshipped blindly. It was one of things she never told Akihiko that she loved about him, how he would find his strength on his own, without having to pray to a deity or a god.

Makoto must have grown annoyed at the conversation and threw herself to her feet. "Just…stop, okay? It's getting late. You need your rest, Ren."

Uncharacteristically, Makoto then walked over to the stairs and walked back down to the first floor without a word. Minako knew she was likely uncomfortable, unable to understand the conversation, and she couldn't blame her. It all sounded silly. It all sounded like a fairy tale. But the Metaverse and personas in general were more than enough proof to change that way of thinking. Hell, anything was likely possible now…

"Don't worry about her," she told Ren, hoping to keep him from worrying too much. "She gets like this a lot when she's in denial. I'll have her text you when we get home, so get your rest and she'll be fine in the morning."

She doubted her words helped him any, but he at least nodded his head. "It is a lot to speculate over. But I know how I'm feeling. This isn't a coincidence."

Morgana also nodded. "No, it's not. We will deal with it as it comes. Let's get some rest so we can be ready for tomorrow."

Minako left them at that, hoping Makoto hadn't left without waiting for her. She breathed a sigh of relief when she found her standing by one of the booths by the door. Her arms were crossed over her chest, and she looked to be deep in thought about something. Minako slowly approached her, trying not to startle her, and spoke lightly when she was close enough to her.

"I know this is bizarre, Makoto." Her daughter turned to face her, but the scowl on her face didn't disappear. "So don't worry about it right now. You have something far more real and important to focus on."

“Do you seriously believe that God, a figure that people seek comfort and peace with, would try and devoid the world of *life?”*

Minako wanted to bite back her response, but she didn’t. “God is also revered because he can strike fear into the people. He is the Almighty, and if someone else challenges his power, well, he’s no longer almighty, is he?”

Makoto dropped her head. “I-It’s scary to think about.”

“So don’t think about it,” she said, placing an arm on Makoto’s shoulder to push her towards the door.

But Makoto shook her hand off. “What is wrong with you? If this is all true, then some all-powerful being is trying to *kill* you! And we haven’t the slightest idea where to even find it! And you can sit here and tell me not to worry and don’t think about it when I don’t even know what’s happening! And then there’s some high and mighty politician who is out for Dad’s head and…and…”

Minako grabbed Makoto’s shoulders and spun her around to look right at her. “I’ve had to face a lot of confusing and terrible things in my life I would never wish upon anyone. And you know what? I wouldn’t have fought back had there not been people I trusted beside me. I fought to keep humanity safe once with my friends. I know how that feels. I’ll do it again in a heartbeat. Focus on what you can do *now,* and we will find a way through this together.”

Makoto didn’t try and resist her a second time when she pulled her with her towards the door. The conversation gave her a slight headache, and she was tired, and she really wanted to stop by and see Akihiko. Makoto could make it back to Ebisu from the station, right? Would she want to stop and see her dad, too?

But when they both took a seat on the train, Makoto leaned against her. She was tired, and she needed to get her home. Minako could see Akihiko in the morning, even if she wouldn’t be able to sleep without him lying next to her, breathing, *living.* He would be greatly upset with her if he found out she denied Makoto her sleep because she wanted another chance to visit.

She had to shake Makoto's arm to get her to stand up at their transfer. As soon as they walked off the train, Makoto grabbed onto her hand and resumed her bodyguard role. It was cute, and it made her laugh to herself, something she desperately needed after the way the night had gone for her. There were still quite a few people out and about, typical for Shibuya evenings, but Makoto did her best to stay vigilant. No one was trustworthy, even if a good majority of the people around them were harmless and innocent. One bad guy could be waiting in the midst…

After walking around to get to their next train, they were heading out of Shibuya without incident. Makoto once again rested her head on her shoulder when they were seated, and Minako wanted to poke fun at her about sleeping on the job. It would hopefully clear any remaining tension in the air, bring a smile to her daughter's face, and help put some of her fears and concerns to rest for at least a night. The only reason she kept her mouth shut was because she didn't have time to get the comment out before they arrived in Ebisu.

Minako and her family had lived in Ebisu for years. It was always peaceful. The people were always nice and friendly. She felt *safe.* It was far enough away from the heart of Tokyo, where most criminals would lay in wait for their chance to strike. The likelihood of running into someone who would kill them in a quiet neighborhood where everyone tried to know everyone would be extremely rare.

But she recognized the feeling of danger long before it reared its ugly head.

Two men, both she hadn't seen before, slowly started to walk up to her. They were relatively sluggish, eyes glazed over with drowsiness or exhaustion, and they were grumbling something under their breath. Had her instincts not been screaming at her, she would have thought they were two businessmen who were either drunk or tired after a long day at work.

The moment one of them reached into his pocket, Minako pushed Makoto behind her. She barely had enough time to lift her arm to deflect the blade that slashed through the air. It cut her arm, enough to draw blood, but not enough to render her immobile from the pain. The second man didn't have a weapon, but he made a move to

lunge at her after giving off some kind of inhuman shriek.

Makoto reacted perfectly, catching the side of the second man's face with her fist. It knocked him off his feet, but it left her wide open for the other maniac with the knife. Minako had never been much of a fighter, even in her prime, but she knew enough to defend herself and protect her children. When the man went to swing the blade at her daughter's shoulder, Minako grabbed his arm with both hands and twisted his wrist as hard as she could until the knife fell from his hands. With him disarmed, she slammed her foot down on one of his, threw an elbow to his face, then pulled his feet out from under him. It wasn't enough to render him unconscious, just stunned, so she grabbed Makoto's arm and bolted around a nearby building.

"Are you okay?"

Makoto was breathing heavily, but she nodded her head. Minako didn't give her time to catch her breath and pulled her along to get more distance between their attackers. Their apartment wasn't far, but she didn't know if it would be safe to return or if they needed to hide somewhere else. Where? Where in the world would they be safe if they couldn't be safe in their own *home?*

For now, she didn't have much of a choice. She kept a tight hold on Makoto's arm while trying to keep her eyes open for anyone else who seemed dangerous. It was either a blessing or a curse in disguise when she managed to make it back to their apartment without another attack. As soon as she made sure the door was shut and locked behind her, she let the shock of what had happened wash over her.

"Mom! You're bleeding!"

What the hell had happened? The people that attacked her weren't *normal.* They moved and acted like they were some kind of zombie…

Oh god…

It was just like how people with Apathy Syndrome had acted years ago…

“Mom?”

Minako yanked her arm away when she felt something touch her. She was met with the wide eyes of her daughter, holding some kind of cloth, a first-aid kit on the floor by her feet. Slowly, she began to feel a slight pain in her arm, a reminder of her cut, and it helped to ground her. She leaned back against the wall to try and regain some composure before she addressed Makoto.

“Sorry…” She lifted her arm enough to try and tell her she was okay, she could still move it, and she didn’t need to worry. “I’m okay…”

Makoto’s eyes narrowed at her. “You’re not okay. You’re shaking.”

No, she wasn’t okay, but she wasn’t about to tell her that. “It’s not every day strangers try and attack you, Makoto.”

“I-I know…” Makoto carefully grabbed her wrist and began to clean up her wound. It wasn’t bad, and it didn’t hurt terribly, but Makoto wrapped a gauze pad around it expertly enough. “They didn’t seem…normal…”

She would have to get in contact with Mitsuru. Not only did she fear history was repeating itself, but she now fully believed that someone really was out to kill her.

This is my attempt to try and tie in P3 and P5. If it’s a stretch, well, it IS and AU and I enjoy writing with the characters ♀

Thank you for reading!

Chapter 173

Chapter 173

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Sleep wouldn't come to her no matter how badly she wanted it.

Makoto was still shaken up from what had happened a few blocks away from home. The men that they had run into, they were different. They didn't move right. They didn't talk. They reacted violently, as if her mom had insulted them in the worst possible way. Her mother was even horrified by it, and she always had a level head in situations like this…

First, Ren's life was in danger. Then, it was her dad's, again. Now, it was her mom? Would there ever come a time when her family could be at peace for more than a few days? Was that too much to ask?

Her phone went off in her hand, scaring her enough that she sat up fully in her bed. She took a few deep breaths, then moved her phone so she could see who was calling her so late in the night.

It was Ren. She forgot that she had texted him to let him know she was home…and that they had been attacked. At first, she didn't want to alarm him, and he hadn't responded right away, so he was probably asleep. Even though she regretted telling him about the two men they encountered, she wanted to hear his voice, to talk to him about what happened, because he always calmed her down when she was terrified.

"R-Ren?"

"Are you okay? What happened? Did you get hurt?"

His rapid-fire questions and genuine concern brought tears to her eyes. "I-I'm okay. M-Mom got a cut on her arm, but it's not bad. It was just…s-scary, is all."

“Did you call the police? Or maybe one of your mom’s friends?”

She had not, at least, not yet. Her mom told her she would talk to Mitsuru about it, but she needed to get some sleep. Why her mom thought she would sleep was beyond her, but that was the end of the argument. And as of now, she didn’t trust the police. Until her dad was back home and could talk about someone he trusted, she refused to run the risk of exposing her family to something even worse. Ren had been the only person she had told.

“N-No…M-Mom said she would…she would tell Mitsuru…”

He sighed into the phone, but it was hard to tell if it was out of relief or annoyance. “I’m glad you’re okay.” Then, he added, “Do you want to talk about it?”

To be honest, she hadn’t even known they were in danger until her mother threw herself in front of her. She saw the knife only after her mom was hurt. That was when her reflexes kicked in, and she punched the other one as hard as she could. He hadn’t been after her, which she found odd, but before she could start asking questions, her mom pulled her away from the scene. It was probably the smartest thing to do, but now she didn’t know why they had attacked them, or why they seemed to take an interest in her mom.

She felt pathetic when she couldn’t make it five words into her story before she started to cry. They were safe, but at the same time, Makoto knew it wouldn’t last. More would come, and it would only be a matter of time before they started knocking at their door, or breaking it down. Was her mom the only one in danger, or would someone go after her dad while he was in the hospital? Would someone go after Ren while he was recovering? Would someone go after her friends, or her sister, when they were asleep?

“It’s okay, Makoto,” Ren said quietly, almost to the point she didn’t hear him. “You don’t have to tell me. You’re safe, and that’s all that matters right now.”

“T-They attacked…they attacked my mom.” She wiped her arm over her face. “She could have been killed had I not been there!”

“But you were there. She’s okay. You’re okay.”

She shook her head hard enough that she almost lost her grip on her phone. “W-What’s going to happen tomorrow? Or next week? When I’m at school, and she’s home by herself?”

“I’m sure Mitsuru will make sure she’s safe, like she’s been doing for all of us.” Ren paused, giving her mind time to let his words sink in. “Take a few deep breaths. You’re going to be okay.”

It was a weird kind of lullaby. His soft voice, the confidence he had in his words, it helped to steady her racing heart and calm her thoughts. He even gave her a count to breathe to, and after a few minutes, she fell back into her pillows and let them engulf her. Given the night’s events, she didn’t see herself sleeping at all, but she could have fallen asleep now.

“Are you gonna dream of me, beautiful?”

He was back to being Ren, and it was a wonderful change of pace. It even pulled a laugh out of her throat. “Are you?”

He cackled. “Oh, no. I don’t dream of myself. I only dream of you. Well, and I guess me, if I’m there with you.”

Sometimes, she thought he was too much for her. “I hope they are good dreams, at least.”

“Maybe…” He paused, which made her grow nervous. “Sometimes, you beat me up.”

“You probably deserved it.”

He laughed again. “I like it. Because then you kiss my injuries and make me feel all better.”

Her heart sank into her stomach. Was he trying to tell her that he was hurt and she wasn’t there to make him feel better? She had wanted to ask her mother if it would be okay to spend the night with him while he was hurt, if he allowed it, but so much kept happening. It also would look suspicious if she was going to and from a place that wasn’t her home. And she hadn’t really seen much of him these

past few days…

“I-I’m sorry, Ren…”

His response came quickly. “Why are you sorry?”

Or had she misunderstood him? “I-I want to be there with you, and I can’t…”

A soft chuckle reached her ears, making her feel slightly less tense. “I know. I want to be with you, especially right now. But we can pretend.”

Pretending just wasn’t good enough. “I-I guess…”

“You can lay your phone down on your pillow and talk to me all night long.” His voice faded for a moment, and she thought maybe he was doing what he told her to do. “Do you like to sleep on the right side or left side of the bed?”

His question confused her. “W-Why does it matter?”

He answered, “Because I need to know everything about my girlfriend!” His exclamation was amusing, but she still didn’t know why he had asked. “And I need to lay you down somewhere. Please don’t make me sleep on the floor.”

Now that the image of her sleeping on *his bed* flashed in her mind, she was happy he wasn’t there to poke fun at her blushing face. “I-I wouldn’t make you sleep on the floor!”

“Whew. I really like cuddling with you, so that would make me sad.”

She wondered if he knew she was blushing and that was why he kept talking with his overly charming tone of voice. “Y-You really need to go to sleep, Ren.”

His charm suddenly turned into sadness. She could all but see the pout on his face. “But I don’t know which side of the bed to sleep on.”

If it was that important for him to know, she had to tell him. Not that

she thought it mattered, or that she had a preference, but it would make him happy. “Your left. So if you annoy me by not going to sleep like I tell you to, I can force you to sleep with my right fist.”

Ren’s laugh echoed all the way through her soul. “You are honestly the best thing that ever happened to me.”

Her heart tightened in her chest. She envied how easily compliments could fly off his tongue. Any time she thought she was getting better, he would do something to outshine her. It wasn’t a competition, and Ren had told her before he didn’t mind, but she wanted to be better. But, it was getting very late. She could have fallen asleep. Hopefully, his voice would keep the nightmares away.

“I-I love you, Ren. Y-You should get some sleep.”

She suddenly didn’t want him to hang up on her. If he said goodnight, she would be back to being alone, in the darkness of her room, feeling small and insecure. Even if he wasn’t physically there with her, he was still *there.*

“D-Don’t hang up!” Ren’s voice jolted her awake. “Ah, s-sorry. I just…never mind.”

She would not let him feel bad when it was also something she wanted. “Don’t. I-I want to…to stay with you, too…”

There was a soft chuckle on his end, which made her heart feel so much lighter. “If I start to snore, will you wake me up?”

“I don’t think you snore, Ren.”

Instead of a response, Makoto heard a shuffling of something over the speaker. “There. Now my Queen is all tucked in and hopefully comfortable.”

She could only laugh quietly and roll her eyes as she placed her phone down on the pillow next to her. “Good night.”

It was quiet for a little while, but then she could have sworn she heard Ren whisper, “I love you, too, Makoto,” before she finally fell asleep.

Sadly, she didn't stay asleep for long. She would wake up at least once an hour, worried either someone was in the apartment that shouldn't be, or worried she knocked her phone on the floor and wouldn't hear her alarm for school. Ren had been asleep, given how quiet he was, and the call was still ongoing. A part of her wanted to talk to him, but he was still hurt and needed to recover. She was being selfish.

She stopped fighting sleep entirely when the first rays of sunshine peeked through her window. It was going to be a long day, and as much as she was looking forward to beating up on some shadows in Shido's palace, she might have to sit out today. She also didn't want to wake Ren to tell him she was getting up and ready for school, so she ended the almost six-hour call and sent him a text instead. Hopefully, he wouldn't be offended by it.

As she was stumbling around her room to find everything she needed for school, she thought she heard something. She regretted ending her call with Ren, but thought better about calling anyone else until she knew where her mother was. After a quick check of the hallway, and verifying that her mom was not in bed, she began to head into the kitchen where the noises were coming from.

Sure enough, her mom was moving about, fixing coffee and breakfast like it was any normal day. When she sighed, her mother tensed and turned to face her faster than Makoto thought she would have. She held up her hands, hoping her mom wasn't about to attack, and realized she may have snuck up on her.

"Makoto, you scared me."

She exhaled again. "Y-You scared me!"

She watched her mom run both of her hands over her face. It was then that Makoto noticed how tired she looked. Had she been able to get any sleep? "Breakfast will be done soon."

Her voice even sounded tired. At least Makoto had Ren to help bring some peace of mind. What did her mom have? "I-I can take over, if you want to rest."

“I’m fine.”

Her mom was usually defensive when it came to cooking, but there was nothing playful about her tone. Makoto lowered her head, hurt by the fact she had done little to nothing to help comfort her mom when she was alone and afraid. “I-I’m sorry…”

There was a pause that left her feeling sick with worry. Makoto only looked back up when she heard a sigh break the silence. “No, I don’t mean to worry you. I just…I miss your dad. I could have lost you last night. I can *still* lose you today, tomorrow, a week from now…”

She walked up to her mom and wrapped her arms around her. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have let you be alone last night. I-I won’t let you be alone today.”

At least her mother chuckled. “Oh, you need to go to school. Mitsuru will be over today, and I’ll make sure to keep the doors locked and a weapon at my side.” The thought sent a chill down her spine. Was that what life was about to come to? Always having a weapon close by in case they needed it? “I’m not an expert fighting machine like you are.”

Her face started to heat up at the unintended (or intended) compliment. “Um…y-you made coffee?”

It was supposed to distract attention away from her, but her mom’s face fell again. “It’s a habit. I always make some for your dad when I make you breakfast.”

“O-Oh…” She thought it would be for the best to keep her mouth shut until she was more awake and able to think clearly. The last thing she wanted to do was upset her mother when she was already worried enough.

However, her mom separated herself from her and walked over to the other side of the kitchen. She reached into a cupboard, pulled out two cups, then placed them next to the coffee maker. Makoto watched in mild interest, then confusion when she poured the coffee into the two cups and handed one to her.

“Drink up, kiddo.”

She didn’t take the cup. “Um. I don’t drink black coffee.” She didn’t really drink coffee, unless Ren made it, because he made it really sweet. But, her mom continued to hold the cup between them, so she felt obligated to take it from her.

“I think we both need it today.” Makoto giggled as her mom lifted the coffee cup to her lips, took a sip, then made a face at the bitterness of the drink. “I really don’t know how your dad does this.”

She was half tempted to turn around and add her own sugar to her cup, but her mom kept on powering through hers. She didn’t want to do the same, but it would also help wake her up. If her mom could do it, she could suck it up, too.

The first sip was terrible. It was far too bitter for her tastes. Before she forced a second drink down her throat, her mom handed her a wrapped bun, and she smiled at the gift. “Don’t tell your dad we had dorayaki for breakfast or he will take it all out of the house.”

At first, the thought made her laugh. However, it soon dawned on her how much her mom loved and missed her dad. The fact she hadn’t slept, made him coffee like he was there, and talked about him like he was at work brought back that earlier guilt. She had been so consumed with her own grief and anger, and Ren had been a wonderful support for her. She didn’t see how her father’s absence was affecting other people, namely her mother, and she hated herself for it.

“Did you sleep okay, Makoto?”

She forced herself to take another sip of her coffee to give her some time to cover up the tears in her eyes. Would it be rude to tell her that she had spoken to Ren? That he had calmed her down so she could at least sleep for a few hours total? Or would that make her upset since she couldn’t call her dad and have him talk to her to calm her down…

“I-I slept…o-okay, I guess…”

“I heard you talking to Ren.”

Makoto almost dropped her cup. “O-Oh…I-I…I’m sorry…”

An awkward silence fell around them, and it was only shattered by the sound of ceramic hitting the countertop. “Why are you sorry?”

Both of her hands wrapped around her drink so she didn’t drop it. “B-Because…you can’t talk to dad…”

“So you think you shouldn’t be allowed to talk to Ren?”

She tried to keep her eyes to the floor to keep her mom from reading her expression. “Um…I-I don’t know…”

She heard another sigh, then there was a light weight on her shoulder. “Honey, I am so happy you have someone to talk to when you’re worried, or scared, or happy yourself. You should never feel bad if you need to talk to him. I want you to go to him for support, if I’m being honest. He’s helped you grow so much, and he makes you happy, and as a mother, that’s all I want for you.”

“But who’s going to support you when you’re scared, and hurt, and you want someone to talk to, and dad isn’t here?” She pulled her shoulder out from under her mom’s hand. “What kind of daughter am I that I can’t see how much you’re hurting because he’s not here when you need him?”

“You can’t be here forever and be happy, Makoto.” It was hard to face her mother when she sounded so broken. “I have friends. And your dad will be home soon. So please. I’ll be okay.”

She didn’t know whether or not to believe her, but there was little she could really think to say. Makoto took a seat at the table with her coffee, trying to think of a way to change the topic to something that would bring a smile to her mom’s face again. Talking about her dad seemed to help, and he would be home soon, hopefully in time for them to go to the palace together.

“Do you think Dad will want to come with us to the palace?”

Mentioning him did the trick. Her mom’s eyes regained some

amount of life to them, and a weak smile came to her face. “I’m not sure. I don’t know if he’s actually coming home today or not.”

Keep her talking. “I’m sure he will be. He doesn’t like to be stuck in a hospital bed for more than necessary.”

Her mom chuckled softly from the kitchen. “No. No he doesn’t, does he?”

Suddenly, there was a loud knock on the door. Makoto stood just as quickly as her mother, exchanging a look of panic. It was early, and Mitsuru hadn’t said anything about stopping by. And from her mother’s reaction, she had no idea who it would be either.

“Stay back, Makoto.” Her mom grabbed a knife from the kitchen, which made Makoto jump up and stop her from reaching the door.

“No. I-I’m sure someone is just here to check on us.”

Who, she didn’t know, but wielding a knife would only cause more reason for alarm. She felt fairly confident she could pummel someone again if it came to a plan for defense. Makoto turned to head for the door herself, but her mom was right behind her. She didn’t tell her to back away, knowing it was pointless, but at least the weapon was out of sight.

The banging didn’t stop, but this time, she heard a voice. “It’s me! Please open the door!”

It was her sister, and she was supposed to go back to work today. Sae likely stopped by because she had found out about last night. Her mother heaved a sigh of relief behind her as Makoto went to open the door.

“Sis! I thought you went back to work.”

Sae shook her head. “Are you okay?”

Her mom came to stand right behind her. “D-Did anything happen… to you?”

“No.” Sae took a few steps forward to step into the entryway and

closed the door behind her. “What happened? Do you remember what they looked like?”

Makoto turned slightly to look over her shoulder, but her mom shook her head like she was in pain. “I-I don’t. A-All I know is that they were after me…”

Sae walked up to her and put her hands on her shoulder. “Mom, this could very well be Akechi trying to eliminate witnesses from-,”

“No. I know exactly what this is.”

Both Makoto and Sae stood still by the harshness of their mom’s tone. She knew? Did she think it had to do with what they had talked to Ren about? It couldn’t be. The story was bizarre, and not at all realistic. But…it was an odd time to be singled out by two zombie-like people in a part of town that never had much violence.

“Apathy Syndrome. It’s making a return. People are starting to lose that free-will like what had happened years ago. This God I was warned about…he’s sending people after me. I know it.”

Sae shot her a look like her mother had lost her mind. “W-What’s this about?”

But what would she tell Sae? That her mom was really losing her mind, or that there was a possibility that some fictitious being was out to kill their mom? In telling Sae about what they discussed with Ren, not only would she have to convince her sister it could be *real,* she had to convince *herself.* She wasn’t sure how she felt about that.

However, the attack was real. That much she could say. “They just shook us up. We’ve never been assaulted in this part of town. So… we’re kind of…worried…”

Her mom’s breathing returned to normal, but Makoto feared that she had just stabbed her in the back. “R-Right. We’re fine…”

Sae also picked up on the pain in her voice. “I-I’m sorry. I don’t mean to take your story lightly. Maybe you could come stay with me for a few days.”

Makoto's eyes widened at her sister's request. It would be a new change of pace, but they also had never been inside Sae's apartment. Was it like their apartment was, or was hers different? Would it be able to house them if her mom decided to go? Would their dad be allowed to go, too? Or was the offer just for her mother?

"Your dad will be home soon. I'll be okay. We'll be okay."

A part of her thought her mom was still upset with both of them for thinking she was crazy. From the look on Sae's face, she thought much the same. Sae was just quicker to comment on it than she was. "Mom. Please. If someone really is trying to kill you, they'll know where to find you."

"No!" Both her and her sister jumped in their place. "I won't leave your dad. He's going to come home today. He's going to! He wouldn't run away!"

Sae took a step back, as if she was afraid her mom would keep yelling if she was any closer. Makoto began to worry that her mother was more upset than she had let on. Given the week she had, Makoto couldn't fault her for being such a wreck. It broke her heart to see this side of her mother, however. If something ever did happen to her dad, and he was taken away from them (for good), would her mom manage by herself? Makoto always thought she could…

"Then…then I'm going to stay here."

Makoto jerked back at Sae's words. "W-What?"

The smallest of smiles tugged at her sister's lips. "What? You don't think I can help take care of the fighting if need be? I'm pretty sure I proved to you the other day what I'm capable of."

It took Makoto several seconds to understand what Sae was saying, but then she felt her heart pop in her chest. Her sister hadn't stayed with them since the day she walked out of the apartment. Well, with the exception of taking care of Makoto while they both thought their dad was dead, but she didn't count that. And when their dad did come back home, they would be together for the first time in years.

It was slightly overwhelming. In a good way. Her mom thought much the same as she threw her arms around Sae with tears in her eyes. Makoto was tempted to head into the kitchen to give them their much needed moment, but her mother reached out and pulled on her arm until she was a part of the hug.

“I am so proud of you. Both of you.” Her mom sniffed, and Makoto could feel the burn in her eyes. “Whenever I feel like I’m at the end of my rope, or I’m losing everything, you’re both there when I need you.”

There was a nice comfortable silence that filled the room. Just her, her mom, and her sister, holding each other and offering support in a dark time. It filled Makoto’s heart with pride, a new sense of determination taking over her and making her feel so much stronger.

Shido, Akechi, *God*, no one would come between her and her family so long as they were all together.

So. I am scheduling Akiham week 2022 for September 18-24. I know that's coming up way too fast, but I really need an Akiham week for this year and September was the voted upon month. It's gonna be terribly rushed, but I hope to get a better jump for next year!

Anyway, thank you all so much for reading!

Chapter 174

Chapter 174

I got the creative juices flowing for this story and sat down on my three day weekend to write. There's going to be more than 200 chapters ( ) but I have up to chapter 192 pretty much in first draft mode. I'm just super lazy with my update speed

Anyway, thank you all again for reading and sticking with me through three years of chaos and mood swings on my end
You're all the best!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Sae stood in the front lobby of the hospital until some poor nurse helped her sit down.

She couldn't wrap her head around the fact Akihiko was alive, and visiting the hospital only made it that much harder. Every time he had been hurt by a criminal in the past, she was there. It was a natural reaction. Except this time, she wasn't there to demand answers or tell him he had been stupid (while secretly relieved he was alive) or ask him who the Phantom Thieves were.

She had watched him *die,* yet he was alive. How? How could she not have noticed that before she broke the news to her sister? Why was it so hard to go see him, to *know* it was real? Why was she so *scared* to walk back into that room where she had last seen him talking with her sister in fear that she had imagined the entire thing and he was *dead?*

Sae would only get so far before she panicked and took off out of the hospital every other time she had visited. The only reason she

was unable to leave this time had been that the staff had caught her first.

It was impossible to tell who would know about Akihiko's miraculous recovery, so when the nurse asked what she could do for her, Sae shook her head. Eventually, the nurse returned to her duties, leaving Sae to catch her breath in peace. She had been on her way to work, to try and act like she was the pawn her boss and the others wanted her to be, but she was scared. One wrong move, one wrong look, and they would *know*.

And instead of diving into the chaos with her rage and hatred at the helm, Sae ran to the hospital to be closer to the man who had fought like hell to save her. As soon as she had walked through the doors, her fear met its match with her doubts, her self-hatred, and the painful reminder that Akihiko had been *killed* and she could have been living in a dream.

She buried her face in her hands to calm herself down. She had to be better than this, for her sister, her mother, for herself. If Akihiko was alive, no one could ever find out. Meaning she couldn't rely on him to be there if she ran into the wrong person, or was falling deeper into a criminal scheme she was unaware of. He may have opened her eyes to *who* those criminals were, but she was on her own now.

Odd how just last week she was ready to label him a criminal and throw him in prison for the rest of his life.

"Sae?"

Her back straightened at the sound of her name in unfamiliar territory. She was quite surprised to see Mitsuru standing in front of her, then not surprised to see her considering why she was likely there. That allowed Sae to come to her feet almost as quickly as Mitsuru had called out to her. "I-Is he…okay?"

Mitsuru eyed her sadly, but nodded her head. "Conscious, yes." Then, "Why are you here?"

She felt a small stab at her heart, but shook it off. "I…I don't know."

Mitsuru's hand came to rest on her shoulder. "I apologize. I know why you're here. Perhaps my question should have been why aren't you at work?"

"They don't miss me if I'm five minutes late or five hours late." Sae lowered her eyes to the floor. "Almost like my only purpose was to bait Akihiko into…"

"Sae, enough." Mitsuru's tone was sharp, yet quiet at the same time. "What happened was not your fault. If that plan didn't work, they would have had several more. What matters now is that you're fine, and they've shown us their trump card far too early."

Her shoulders relaxed, if only slightly. "It's just all so…surreal…"

"I can't imagine this being easy for you to understand." A small smile appeared on Mitsuru's face. "Yet you seem to be handling yourself rather well. You should be proud of yourself, Sae."

It lifted her spirits up enough to where Sae felt like she could return to work for a few hours. Depending on how her day went, she could "investigate" someone and get out of there. Or, she could gather intel from rumors and hallway chatter. She was sure her computer was still locked, and her boss would likely realize how much she was *gone* if she didn't show up today.

"But please do be careful," Mitsuru warned. "Your mother and your sister were attacked last night. I don't mean to frighten you, but please remain aware of your surroundings and the people in it. Do not hesitate to call or-,"

Sae had long stopped listening to Mitsuru after she heard her family had been "attacked" and turned and ran out of the hospital. Were they okay? What had even happened? Was it a home invasion? Who? She knew that if Akechi were to try anything, it wouldn't be a brazen attack in this world. *She* could annihilate that teenage punk all her own. Makoto could have easily done the same.

If Akihiko couldn't be around to be the family's eyes and ears and strength, Sae would gladly take that spot. She wouldn't be as good, but she would do everything in her power to keep them safe.

Her heart was pounding from the second Mitsuru told her they were attacked to when she listened to her mother explain to her what had happened. She worried that Akihiko's missing presence was affecting Minako in more ways than one. After all, a *God* sending people to kill her?

Regardless of who was after her family, Sae was going to protect them. If that meant playing nice with the bad guys to stab them in the back in the end, she would. If that meant quitting her job all together to stay in a home she hadn't been a part of in years, she would. No one would hurt them unless they got through her first…

Just as she was getting comfortable in her mother's hold, another knock broke the silence. Minako stiffened immediately, something that poked Sae's heart, not being one to see her mother so scared. Makoto looked over at her, then they both nodded their head as Sae approached the door.

A sigh of relief filled the room when Mitsuru stepped into their apartment. "I apologize for startling you."

Minako nearly threw Sae and Makoto into the wall to stand in front of Mitsuru. "Aki. Is…is he okay?"

Another stab to her heart. Minako sounded so…weak, and frail. It was very unlike the person she saw in that other world who fought Akechi with whatever means she could. "Mom…"

Mitsuru held up her hand to try and calm Minako down. It didn't work. In fact, the longer Mitsuru remained quiet, the more anxious Sae became. "He's…okay."

The pause was more than enough for Makoto to question her. "Is something wrong?"

"Please tell me he's okay!"

Sae put a hand on her mother's arm, then shot a look to Mitsuru. The elder broke eye contact with her, dropping her eyes to the floor. Sae's heart fell into her stomach.

"He's alive. However, I'm concerned he's very…distraught over the

fact he was dead." Mitsuru addressed them again before they could say anything. "I would like him to rest at home, surrounded by all of you rather than in a closed-off hospital room where he has no one. Getting him out of the hospital unnoticed will not be the easiest of tasks, but I would like to move him today. I don't know if he would be able to handle another night there."

It made sense, as much as it hurt her to admit. To actually *die*, then be left alone in a silent room with that memory would be horrifying. Sae grew angry with herself for never being able to break through her fear to see him, to give him some kind of reminder that he was *alive*, that they were alive…

Makoto shook her head, pulling attention to herself. "I want to be here when he comes home. I'm sure the others will understand."

"It may not be easy to hear, but you have to go to the palace today," Mitsuru told her sister. "I cannot guarantee that you will be back before we release Akihiko, but Shido must be dealt with as soon as possible. Fuuka will at least be able to correspond with you and your team, if that gives you any sort of comfort. I don't anticipate this being difficult, but you will be able to see him tonight unless something drastic happens."

Hearing Shido's name was like nails on a chalkboard. The election was quickly approaching, and if anything, the public was putting more and more faith in his victory. Sae had no idea how the Phantom Thieves did their work, nor would she ever understand, but she knew the process didn't happen in one day, or one week. They had to be careful. Shido could still have more tricks up his sleeve. Akechi could, too.

Akihiko had done more than enough. It was time for the rest of them to pull their own weight. "I agree." Her statement pulled Makoto's attention, but Sae didn't stop. "Akihiko has been working on this case for months. We have a deadline. If we don't have a plan and start when we feel we are ready, we'll never see the end of this. The longer we wait, the more we'll have to make up, and we'll be more likely to make a mistake."

It was weird being a voice of reason when she had no idea what

was really happening. However, Sae knew her part. As much as she wanted to take more time off work to take care of her sister and her mother, she knew she had to go back. She knew people would start to talk, which could lead to an investigation about where she was and who she was spending time with. Akechi would likely inform everyone about Makoto and her friends being the Phantom Thieves, and it was her job as Makoto's sister to make sure Akechi didn't go after them.

To stay one step ahead of them, Sae had to be remain the oblivious sheep amongst the wolves. In her line of work, information was everything. She could better plan what Akechi would do if she heard it for herself, or from all those he worked with.

Minako ran a hand under her eyes, then gave her a soft smile. "I know you probably don't want to hear it, but you really do remind me of your father. Keeping your head up when there's so much out there to drown you."

Makoto sighed, her head falling to her chest. "Y-Yes. I guess you have a point. There's still so much we don't know about Shido and his accomplices. The sooner we find more about them, the better."

Sae reached out to put her hand on her sister's shoulder. "I know Akihiko has been training you. Now would be a good time to show him that you're ready to lose those training wheels."

Her sister smiled at her and nodded her head. "Right."

"I will keep you all informed of our plan as it develops." Mitsuru turned to head back to the door. "Sae, I would like to meet with you and your father once he is ready so we can be prepared legally to take action against Shido."

Never in her life would she have thought Mitsuru would give her a life goal. Legally taking action against Shido was almost like a suicide mission, but Sae knew her allies. If anyone was going to have a fighting chance taking down a man like Shido and the hundreds of people he worked with, it was Mitsuru and Akihiko. She would be honored to get that kind of chance herself.

“I will take Makoto to school,” Mitsuru said. “I would assume you’d like to get to work, Sae.”

She wouldn’t tell Mitsuru she wasn’t *thrilled* to go back into the lion’s den, but she was excited in a difference sense. She hoped that wouldn’t show on her face when she walked into the courthouse after almost three days of being absent. It was her chance to prove her worth to Mitsuru, to her father, to Makoto and her friends. After everything they had done for her, this was the least she could do.

But even still… “I can’t just leave my mother here by herself.”

Mitsuru gave off a quiet chuckle. “Yukari will be dropping by here shortly.”

Yukari…that was the same girl had been with Akihiko when they had saved Amamiya. Sae didn’t feel comfortable leaving until Yukari actually showed up, but her mother grabbed her hand, a subtle smile working its way to her face.

“I’ll be okay, Sae.” She squeezed her hand and Sae’s heart clenched. “You have bigger and more important things to do than worry about me.”

That was not at all true. However, one last glance from her mom kept those words trapped in her throat. “Go take out all of those bad guys like you always do, Sae.”

It wasn’t how she wanted to say goodbye, but Sae told all of them to stay on guard and call her if anything were to happen. She only left when each of them promised they would stay in touch and stay safe, then she told them she would do the same.

Once she was on the train heading to Kasumigaseki, a different feeling began to take over. She wasn’t scared, or nervous, or excited, and she couldn’t describe it. This would be her first time back at the office after Akechi had tried to kill her, and her mother, and her father. She had to keep up the appearance that Akihiko was dead, that she still hated him, but with no Phantom Thieves to keep her busy, what would she do? Would her boss, or Akechi even, try and cut her from the prosecution? Would the police that supported

Akihiko be in a rage and demand answers for what they likely heard was another fatal heart attack?

…How did Akihiko's death become public? Was it as widespread as Amamiya's? And if it was, who all would care? How would she try and fight the criminals in her own office if she couldn't let them know she *knew* the truth?

Akechi sure put her in a bit of a bind. Sae couldn't openly condemn him for killing Akihiko when she had no proof aside from her own witness statement. Akechi could easily try and finish her off at any time while she had to keep pretending they were coworkers. It was going to be one hell of a challenge, but it was one she was going to accept. Her boss, Akechi, Shido even, were not going to steer her wrong again. Not with Mitsuru and her father and everyone else who risked their lives to save her.

She would show them.

Sae didn't even get a chance to make it across the street to the courthouse before several police officers ran up to her. "What the hell happened?!"

"Is Sanada really dead?"

"He was murdered! He had to be! I don't trust anyone here!"

"Did you kill your own father?!"

That accusation she hadn't been ready for. The man who said it glared daggers at her, and Sae did her best to fight through the cold grip around her throat to defend herself. "I didn't kill him…"

She had to stop there. Telling them Akechi had killed Akihiko would get her nowhere. There was no point in putting that into their heads. However, they clearly expected her to know more than she was telling them, and she had no idea what she could say without it backfiring in her face.

"The police commissioner sounded awfully smug when he told us the other day!" one officer screamed loudly. "The brass was behind this. You all know how much they tried to frame him for everything to

get him to quit!”

Another officer stood right in her face. “You know something, Niijima! After all that man was willing to do for you, you have a chance to *do something* for him!”

Sae hadn’t been ready for this, but the growing pain in her chest was becoming unbearable. With how the week had gone dealing with the news of Akihiko’s death, to his resurrection, to her sister and Akechi, she didn’t need this. She couldn’t trust these men yet, not when Shido’s henchmen hid in plain sight. One wrong move would destroy everything Akihiko had fought for.

“Niijima!”

“I’ll be working on his case,” is what she told them all. “If you hear anything that could lead to a suspect, please let me know.”

It didn’t win them over. “This is bullshit!”

“He’s *dead!”*

“You know something!”

Finally, Sae rounded on them and unleashed days of pent-up aggression. “Listen. He was my father. I treated him like an enemy since I was a child. I know damn well what kind of man he was, what he had sacrificed for me, and now he’s *dead!* I can’t even tell him I’m sorry for all the hell I brought to him! So don’t you dare sit there and think that I’m going to sit back and let someone get away with this! I will put an end to this, because this is my only way to tell him that I’m sorry!”

Sae turned on her heels and stormed across the street before they saw the tears come to her eyes. She walked fast enough that she was sure her eyes dried out, but then her own words echoed in her ears.

She would put an end to this. Shido and Akechi and god knows who else had another thing coming if they thought Akihiko’s death would paralyze her. Or keep her from seeking out the truth. Even if Akechi warned everyone that she *knew*, Sae would make them grow

complacent until her new team was ready to strike back.

“Niijima. Wait.”

Someone grabbed her arm. It was one of the officers she had yelled at, and the rest of them were quick to follow. They all stood together, and Sae began to see the signs of regret and loss.

“He was a great man,” one young man said. “He was never afraid to stand up for what was right. He was never afraid of where the truth would lead him. You’re not the only one who needs to apologize to him, and we are all going to do what we can to help.”

Another nodded confidently. “Sanada was the life source of our office. We all took him for granted most times. When we heard he was dead, I don’t think any of us believed it.”

“But he is dead.” The officer who screamed in her face came up to stand in front of her again. “He’s not coming back. We don’t have a strong and intelligent leader to see us out of this mess. We’re all struggling to even accept that he’s gone, but crime isn’t going to stop to let us grieve!”

Sae was about to fire back with something, but then he stopped her. “There are so many people who hated him, who stabbed him in the back, who kicked him while he was down. But not us. We may only be a few people, but he was our leader. And in his place, we need you to help us.”

Sae stumbled back at his words. “What?”

All of them before her nodded their heads. “You’re his daughter. You’re just as scary as he could be. You’re just as smart and able as he was. If we’re going to get justice for his death and become a force that he would be proud of, we need to work together.”

“Kirijo-san already knows we’re not going quietly. We will have this entire city rioting for justice! All those criminals who stood against him will know we are coming for them! We’re not afraid! We will outnumber them! We have to do this!”

“If you need anything, Niijima-san, we are here for you, too.” A

younger officer bowed his head. “Your father’s sacrifice will not be in vain. He’s passed us the torch. Let’s light up the night together!”

There was nothing she could say to a group of men she didn’t know personally. She was touched at their sentiment, at their eagerness to fight back, and how determined they were to continue Akihiko’s work. She knew Akihiko meant a great deal to the police force, and she knew several people would be extremely unhappy with the news of his death, and she would need every single person whoever offered to help on her team.

“Thank you.” She held a hand over her heart, that feeling of pride and strength claiming her heart and making her stand tall again. “I will need all of you to help me. We fight a war, one the enemy may not know they have started, but one they will never win. So please, please lend me your strength.”

The supposed leader of the small group extended his hand. “You can count on us, Niijima-san.”

Sae desperately wanted to believe that these men were on her side. She could ask Mitsuru later once she got settled into her office for the day. Sae was not about to take the small amount of trust she had for anyone and give it away over some words. For now, the gesture was enough to rejuvenate her determination.

The second she stepped into the courthouse, Sae felt like she walked into a warzone. Her heart was pounding, reminding her that this was enemy territory, and she had to tread lightly. Some random people she only knew by name approached her and offered their condolences. It all seemed fake, a front even, and Sae began to wonder how so many people knew Akihiko and knew she was his daughter. It wasn’t broadcast in the courthouse like it had been the police station. Everyone tended to mind their own business and focus on their work…

Maybe this was all part of the plan. Sae brushed it off easily enough. For now, it was sign everyone believed Akihiko was really dead. No one knew he was recovering in a hospital bed. That was a good thing.

Sae made it as far as her floor when the receptionist called out to her. “Oh. Niijima-san. The director would like to see you.”

She tried to remain calm as she began making her way to the end of the hallway. The director hadn’t seen her in days, so he was likely about to hand her a new case or ask her about the ones sitting on her desk. Hopefully. And hopefully it was just him and not Akechi or any more of Shido’s henchmen.

She knocked once, then she heard his voice telling her to come in. Sae held her breath for a second or two, then released it slowly. When she pushed open the door, she was relieved to find the director behind his desk and alone.

“Shut the door.”

The edge in his voice made Sae worry about why he had called for her. Was he going to fire her? Had Akechi’s success in capturing Amamiya shown him that she was too weak for the job? It made it difficult to approach him, but she told herself that if she did lose her job, Mitsuru would gladly give her a new one. She just couldn’t try and gather information while hiding under the enemy’s nose.

…Did they know that was what she was planning on doing already?

“I heard about Sanada’s death.”

Oh. It was better than getting fired, but there was still something off. “I’d like to think most people have.”

The director leaned forward in his chair, his chin resting on his hands. “He was a good man. He may have caused more trouble recently than he was worth, but I did like him.”

Sae’s hands clenched at her side. “I see.”

If he called her into his office to talk about how glad he was Akihiko was out of the picture, Sae beat him into oblivion without question.

However, he did much the opposite. “I don’t think a stress-induced heart attack is how that man died.”

He pushed himself up out of his chair, his hands clasping behind his back, and stood in front of the window. Sae was left speechless, not at all expecting the director to discredit the rumors, all while wondering why he told her at all.

“Sir?”

“What I want to tell you needs to stay between you and me. Do I make myself clear?”

Sae was too shocked to answer one way or another. The director *never* confided in her anything, good or bad, so what was he going to tell her now? Did he know who really killed Akihiko? Was that why she hadn’t run into Akechi? Weren’t they working together? Or were they not?

“I know who killed your father.”

If the director knew, and was correct, he would know about the Metaverse. He would know about Akechi being the one behind the mental shutdowns. He would know about Shido and his ultimate plan to use this other world to eliminate anyone who stood in his way.

And he *would* have known all of that long before she did…

Which would mean he was one of *them*.

“And that would be?”

Sae stood ready to attack in self-defense in case there was someone hiding in the room. Or they were about to go back to the Metaverse like they had done in the train station. Every nerve in her body told her to prepare herself, that something was very wrong, and anything was possible right now.

What she didn’t expect to happen was the director to open his mouth, grab at his chest, and choke on his breath. He fell to his knees, appearing to be in pain, and then it clicked in her mind.

He was having a heart attack.

Her feet moved to catch him as he fell over. Sae shook his shoulders to try and keep him conscious, then moved to lay him on his back. She reached for her phone to call for help, but she saw the black ooze foaming out of his mouth and his eyes. A sense of horror took over her, her phone falling to the ground, unable to do anything but watch a man die in front of her.

This was far from a normal heart attack. This was what had to happen when someone suffered a mental shutdown.

Akechi had killed him. He knew the director knew too much, just like Okumura had known too much and was about to rat everyone out. Just like her father had witnessed when Masami had died in the back of Mitsuru's car all those months ago.

The director may have been against her as of late, but he didn't deserve to go out like this. The timing was far too coincidental. Almost like Akechi knew he was going to tell her the truth and had him killed instead.

And all Sae could think about as the medics carted the director's dead body out of the office was that if this was all planned, she hadn't seen the worst of it.

The more I write She chapters, the more I add Sae chapters. She's so much fun to work with!

Chapter 175

Chapter 175

I promise you all I am working on this. I have to channel my creative writing while it's here. I will likely update with several chapters at once when it dies

PS: I have maybe 10-15 more chapters to write. If that makes anyone happy

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After almost a week of hiding in the attic of Leblanc, Ren was able to get out and fight again.

Kind of. He was still a little sore. Most of his bruises were going away. The cuts were healing. He didn't need medication to fight off the pain. He missed being useful rather than dependent. He was eager to get back out and stretch his legs, breathe some fresh air, and get started on their new mission.

He also felt like he was slipping mentally. It was hard to fall asleep, his mind running away with him every so often. He was constantly asking himself *what if* this and *what if* that. What if he never came to Tokyo? What if he tried to be friends with Akechi? What if he had been rejected by his friends for his criminal status, knowing everything they did about his conviction? What if he never received his powers, and Kamoshida had him expelled, or if Haru blamed him for her father's death...

Then, there was Masayoshi Shido. Never once after saving that woman back in his hometown did Ren think he would ever have a chance like this. Not that he cared too much about what Shido had done to him, but he was going to fight for what that man had done to his friends. Shido didn't care about anyone but himself, and Ren

couldn't wait to put an end to his tyranny over the city, over Japan, and the people that lived there.

The real reason he was so eager to get up and moving again was to see Makoto. It would be the first time he had heard from her since she had told him about the attack on her and her mother. It had scared the hell out of him, and he had heard as much in her voice. It made him feel weak, being unable to be there for her when she was frightened, or to be there for her family after a terrifying event. All she had been able to tell him that two strangers attacked her and her mom after their unscheduled meeting before she broke down into tears. Given what they were doing and who they were up against, Ren was worried it wouldn't be the last time someone came after them…

The quicker they took care of Shido, the quicker everything would return to normal.

Or would they?

What about this God Minako had talked about? Ever since she had left that night, Morgana had been distracted. The cat knew something, but he told Ren that he couldn't remember. It just *felt* strange. Shido was no god, even if he would be a tough opponent, so who was God? And why would he want to take out someone like Minako?

He had tried to do some research as he laid in bed, but nothing fruitful came out of it. Morgana always reminded him that Shido had to come first. God hadn't made himself known yet, that they were aware of. They had to work with what they had, and even should something come up, Shido was an immediate threat.

At least they knew Sanada was alive. That had been a weight off his chest since Mitsuru had told them all. It was impressive how one man could affect their group's morale as much as Sanada did, but Ren wouldn't complain. He was a powerful ally, a great leader, and had gone to great lengths to keep them all safe.

And to think back when Ren first met him, he sent Morgana to spy on him because he didn't trust the older man.

They were all to meet at the Diet building shortly after school let out. Ren would head out with Futaba once Fuuka told them Akechi wasn't in their travel path. Yukari and Minako would arrive with Yusuke. The others would arrive with Ken. They had to arrive at staggered intervals, but nothing too far apart to avoid one group being in the same spot for too long. It was the little details Mitsuru had planned out that made Ren appreciate all the help that much more.

Ren and Futaba were the last ones to show up, but as soon as they were there, no one wasted any time. He didn't even get a chance to say hi to Makoto before they were being pulled into the Metaverse. It took him a second to adjust to the change and how quickly it came about, but then he became distracted over the palace itself.

Yukari was the first one to speak. "It…we're on a boat!"

"Well duh," Ryuji said sarcastically. "His palace keyword was ship, yeah?"

"Don't mind him," Ann added with a tug to Ryuji's ear. "They're not used to this, you dummy."

"My bad…"

Yusuke came to stand in the middle of the group, then turned his head to take in the change in scenery. "Such a disgusting vision of the country he wishes to save from ruin."

They all peered out towards the horizon. There were thousands of buildings sinking into the massive ocean. It appeared to be the entire city of Tokyo on the brink of destruction while Shido sat safely in his fancy ship. Even after all the horrible palace leaders and their twisted versions of reality they had come across, Shido had them all beat. How could one man persuade so many people to believe in his ideals when he didn't care about them at all?

"Let's go."

Minako didn't even hesitate as she spun around and began heading towards the door. Makoto was the one to catch her wrist, stopping

her before she charged off inside an area no one had been yet. “Stop.”

When Minako yanked her arm out of Makoto’s hand, Ren felt like it was too soon for her to be coming along. “I have my powers back. I have to fight him. He’s taken him away from me for the last time.”

“Alright, calm down, Minako.” Yukari walked up to her friend with a slight roll of her eyes. “What did I tell you before we left? If you start acting up, I’m taking you home.”

The banter was childish, and Yukari spoke with a tone one might use with a misbehaving child. However, it seemed to work in their favor as Minako sighed deeply. “R-Right…”

Makoto stepped up to her mother next. “We have to take this one day at a time. We don’t know what we’re up against, but we do know Shido isn’t the only one involved. Us charging in right now and making a scene will make the rest of our infiltration difficult.”

“How about we sit this one out and watch you kids work.” Ken put a hand on Minako’s shoulder. “The only other time we’ve been inside a palace has been back with Sae, and this is clearly much different. You guys lead the way. If you need help, we will be here.”

Ren thought the idea was a good one, given how emotions were high and time was running short. He nodded his head silently, then took his stance at the front of the group to lead them all inside the ship.

The interior of the ship was not at all what he was expecting. There were a few guards roaming about by a large door. There were two floors; one leading farther back into the ship and another hidden by an extravagant circular staircase. A giant chandelier hovered above them. The carpeting was plush and embroidered professionally. It was beautiful, and he would have said that aloud had it been a friend’s cruise line and not an enemy palace.

“This is uh,” Yukari started. “Kinda nice…”

“It’s all part of the illusion,” Morgana answered for him. “This is

where Shido thinks he's safe. Hidden behind his money, his power, and his supposed friends. But we will soon put an end to that."

Ren shot a look to Makoto, who had her eyes on her mom, but Minako shook her head. "I'm fine. But…we shouldn't be impressed by his flash décor. Shido likely acts like this in the other world, too."

"Let's head further inside."

Ren agreed with Haru, and no one said anything more. For the most part, he tried to avoid fighting and gather intel on the lay of the palace itself. He wasn't a boat person, but just from the view from the outside, there was quite a bit of ground to cover. Mazes were common occurrences, and with someone as devious and masterful as Shido, one wrong turn could be their downfall.

"So uh, why do all of you get the bad ass costumes?" Ken looked right at him and narrowed his eyes. "I mean, a duster? That's just… so cool…"

Ren could hear Ryuji's smile through his mask. "Pretty cool, huh?"

Ren felt his face flush at the compliment. Aside from Ryuji's comment when he had first changed back in Kamoshida's palace, no one had said anything about his outfit being *cool*. "Let's figure out where we need to be going."

The deflection worked in his favor. "Right. Shido's shadow could be anywhere on this boat. We need to move carefully."

Ken held a hand under his chin. "You don't think he'd be hiding out in the captain's quarters or something? I mean, if he's steering this ship, that means he's driving it, right?"

Makoto copied his posture, except she was really cute when she did it. "That's true. He could have hired hands at the helm. I doubt that, however, as this is *his* ship. That has to be where he is."

"And I'm assuming he will be heavily guarded and we won't be able to reach him easily and typical dungeon stuff." Yukari groaned beneath her breath. "Just proves he's afraid of true strength if he can't come out and fight us right off the bat."

Morgana stood in the middle of the group. “Palace leaders control everything here. Simply beating them with brute strength won’t do anything. Finding his treasure is what we have to do first. By doing that, we let him know his money, his power, his friends mean nothing, and then we can prove that with strength.”

Minako rubbed her head like she was nursing a headache. “I can’t say I follow, but…these worlds have never made sense. Let’s just… work with what we have for now.”

She sounded like she really was a leader at one point in time. Decisive, thoughtful, but able to keep moving ahead. If she was feeling better, and was in a better mental state of mind, Ren may have let her take the reins. For curiosity’s sake.

For now, he followed her advice and began pushing his team forward into the ship. Haru was the one who pointed out the large door in the distance, and large doors usually held back large things. Like treasure, or an enemy hiding. It was heavily guarded, which excited Ryuji and Ken, both eager for a chance to do something rather than hide in the shadows.

Ren figured it was pointless when they were close enough, then reached for his mask as he scanned over his friends. “We’re in for a fight. Get ready.”

They all nodded their heads in agreement and Ren pushed himself off the wall and into the middle of the hallway. The enemy spotted him immediately and charged ahead. Ryuji and Yusuke joined him as he called forth one of his many personas, engaging in a battle with the first wave of shadows. Yusuke would freeze the enemy in a line, Ryuji would lunge at them with Captain Kidd, and Ren would slice at them with his weapon if the beatdown didn’t take them out.

Haru and Ann stepped in for the second wave. Ann used her weapon to trip them up. Haru unleashed a barrage of ammo. Morgana called out to Zorro to slash any remaining shadows.

Their work got a round of applause from the older group. “Wow. That was great!”

“You guys work really well together!”

Ren noticed Minako gripping Makoto like she had been *terrified* of the attack. Makoto kept telling her it was okay, that nothing would hurt them, they were all strong enough to fight off some weak lackeys.

It was too soon for her to be here, and Ren thought himself an idiot for thinking it was a good idea to bring her along. He didn’t know what she had seen that day in the Metaverse, but he was sure that Akechi wasn’t alone. Sanada could have taken Akechi out on his own, or so he had thought. It was just so hard to believe *Akechi* and his persona would ever be able to defeat someone with experience and two reasons to *win.*

Now that he thought about it, could someone else have been there? Akechi and Robin Hood wouldn’t have been enough to hold back Minako and Sae and Sanada…

“Let’s check out that door.”

He could ask her later. For now, they had a job to do. Minako seemed like she was calming down, and Ren left her in the care of Makoto as he turned to their next giant roadblock.

“We need keys?”

“Why doesn’t that surprise me.”

“It says here we need five letters of introduction?”

“The hell does that even mean?”

“I would assume that means we need to find five people that Shido knows well enough to hold the key to his treasure.”

“Um, can’t we just break the door down?”

Morgana shook his head. “We don’t want him to know we’re here yet. We need to find those five VIPs and force them to give us these letters.”

“I doubt we would be able to knock the door down, even if we had the power,” Ren added. “Mona is right. Shido has his treasure locked up tight, which means the only way we can steal it is to sneak our way into his inner circle. To do that, we have to find those five people.”

“You think they have golden crowns on their head?” Ken began looking around the hall. “I mean, there seem to be a ton of people here. Yet no one is fighting us or really even caring we’re here.”

Yukari crossed her arms with a scowl. “No. I heard some of them say we didn’t belong here. Or we were servants. Or lost. They noticed us, that’s for sure.”

“They are just a front,” Morgana explained. “It’s all a part of Shido’s cognition. This is how he sees the Diet members. Well, pretty much everyone. They’re all clueless, naïve people he can control while using them for money and respect.”

Haru turned to Futaba. “Can you detect anyone special?”

The young girl shook her head. “N-No. We’re probably going to have to do some old-fashioned leg work here. But as soon as we have a lead, I can look into them.”

“We’ll cover more ground if we split up, yeah?” Ken rolled his shoulders, then turned to look at him. “It seems like we’ve taken care of the major threat in this area.”

Ren agreed. “We can search in pairs. Just in case.”

When the group split up into smaller teams and began to head off to chat with the people around them, Ren made his way over to Minako and Makoto. “Are you alright?”

Minako nodded, but Makoto shook her head. “We should head back as soon as we can. I know we didn’t do much, but-,”

“No.”

“Mom…”

“I’m fine.”

“If you don’t mind me asking this now, what happened that day, when you fought off Akechi?”

Makoto narrowed her eyes at him, but he held up a hand. “I’ve watched Akechi fight. He’s tough, yes, but I just can’t wrap my head around him being able to single-handedly overpower Sanada. Was someone else there with him?”

“Ren…”

Minako cringed, which made him feel terrible for asking. He was going to apologize when she began to speak. “He…he wore that black outfit. He’s your criminal. The man with the black mask. But there was another human. A cop, I think. Akechi...*changed* him into a shadow? And Akechi was making all the shadows stronger...”

Ren and Makoto reeled back in shock. “What?”

“Akechi can strengthen random shadows?”

Morgana had taken off with Ann (no surprise), so Ren couldn’t ask him what it all meant. The entire persona situation was difficult to comprehend. It would make sense that Akechi wouldn’t show off that skill while they were working together in Sae’s palace, but how could he manage that kind of energy while maintaining a persona? Was the floor they had been on in Mementos crowded with shadows that day? Had Akechi known that, and used it to his benefit? But the Phantom Thieves had never run into hordes of shadows as they descended further in Mementos...

“And then he summoned his persona to defend him against Thanatos, but that little thing was just a decoy so Akechi could escape.”

That also caught Ren’s attention. Robin Hood was Akechi’s persona. And last he remembered, he wasn’t so little. “He could control shadows *and* summon Robin Hood?”

Minako’s eyes met his, and he knew something was off. “He summoned a persona named Loki.”

Makoto shook her head. “W-Wait…Akechi has another persona?” Then, a light bulb seemingly went off in her head. “That had to have been why Dad was asking me about his persona when we went into Sis’s palace. But…how?”

“I can’t say I’m the expert, but if Minako has her powers back, why can’t Akechi be a wild card, too?”

Then, something else hit him. “Loki…he’s the trickster god in mythology. Akechi may not be able to summon several personas like we can, but…maybe he can summon two very different personas depending on what he wants.”

“Akechi is a…trickster?”

Ren shook his head. “Loki could transform into a different being to get other gods to do his bidding. Just…just like Akechi seems to be doing now.”

Minako tilted her head to the side. “You really do know a lot, don’t you?”

He tried to fight off the heat rising to his face while appreciating the warm smile that Minako showed him. “I’ve uh, read a lot of books.”

“This is all ridiculous,” Makoto said with a frown. “First, you guys think my mom is carrying death, who is *good*, and that god is bad and is after her. Now, it’s Akechi being able to transform into light and dark while summoning two different personas?”

He knew she would likely want solid proof, and he was unable to give it to her. “I know it all sounds crazy, and it’s hypothetical, but none of this world has ever made sense. I don’t expect it to now.”

Minako stepped in between the two of them. “Regardless, we should help out in the search for these VIPs. I’m not about to become dead weight to you guys.”

“You should take it easy, Mom.”

“I agree,” Ren replied softly. “We can try and find out who these five people are, and then we can call it a day. I’m sure once we know

who the five targets are, we can have Futaba and Fuuka look into them when we get back. That way, when we return, we'll be ready."

Minako sighed heavily. "Fine." Then, she added, "But next time we come back, I'm fighting."

Ren figured it would be best to read the situation then. However, their conversation not only gave him much to think about, but took more time than he thought. By the time he was about to head off in search of more information about Shido's VIP's, most of his team had returned. Ken ever spared him a look, making him feel like a child being scolded in a classroom.

"You must work fast, kid." A grin started to spread over his face. "Or not at all. You one of those kids who passes every class by letting your classmates do all the work for you?"

Ryuji unknowingly added to the insult. "What did ya learn, Joker?"

Minako turned out to be his savior. "Oh, I was just telling him all about the times I caught you feeding your veggies to Koromaru and I wouldn't let you come with us into Tartarus because you weren't big and strong like the rest of us."

Ren tried not to laugh, but he did smile. He was sure Ken saw it. "Right, because the time you and Yukari gorged yourselves on ice cream for a week made you guys big and strong."

"Watch it. I'm still your elder, and I can destroy you if I need to."

Yukari and Haru joined them right after Minako's comment. Yukari walked up to Ken and pinched his cheek. "Did I just hear you call me *big?"*

Haru giggled into her hands. Ryuji sat in awe. Ren continued to smile and hide his laughter. When the rest of his team joined them a few minutes later, Morgana took control of the conversation.

"So, what have we all learned?"

Their targets were now narrowed down to the five they were sure held the keys to Shido's treasure. A politician. A noble. A TV

executive. An IT president. And someone nicknamed “the cleaner”. They didn’t get names like Ren had hoped for, but Futaba was determined to find out more information on them without it.

“Now what do we do?”

“We head back,” Ren said, earning some slight resistance from his friends. “We have done enough for today. Oracle can take some time to look into our targets so we are ready to talk to them when we meet.”

Ann asked, “How are we supposed to get the letters? By fighting them?”

“I would assume we would need them to write one for us,” Makoto answered next to him. “I highly doubt they have them on their person, and it is very likely we will need to outsmart them to earn the letter.”

“I think Shido would notice a fake if we forced them to write one instead, or if we wrote it and had them sign it.” Haru’s eyes fell to the floor. “It may be more trouble than it’s worth, but it would be for the best. If we fail, we may not make it through the door in time.”

Yukari smiled and waved her hand to get their attention. “Don’t forget about us. We may have done nothing today, but we can be extra hands. If we formed two groups, we could tackle more ground.”

“Absolutely.” Ken slammed a fist into his palm. “We’ll show you guys that we still have what it takes!”

The enthusiasm was appreciated, and it did make Ren feel like they could get through this palace quickly enough. Splitting up seemed like a great option, but he also didn’t want half his group to fall into a trap and the other be none the wiser. Not that they couldn’t *all* fall into a trap, but he would rather have the extra eyes, minds, and hands should something go wrong.

But that was a topic for another day. “For now, let’s head back and get some rest. We can share what we’ve learned with the others. I’ll

be counting on you, Oracle, for details on our targets."

Futaba lifted a hand to her head in salute. "You gotcha!"

Leaving was more of a challenge than he thought it would have been. Ren wanted to walk next to Makoto, like they usually did, since moments with her had been far and few between. She walked next to her mother, whispering about something that kept both of their faces stoic and unreadable, and Ren didn't think it was appropriate for him to get in the middle of it. Especially just for Makoto's attention.

Instead, he stood next to Ryuji and Ann, smiling weakly at their bickering when the blond boy mentioned he was so much stronger than he had been at the start. Ren chimed in from time to time, taking stabs at his friend's ego when Ryuji would flex his muscles and tell them, "You're just jealous of my big guns."

They had left the palace without incident, as the puppets on board had thought little of their group. Ren decided to try one more time to grab Makoto's attention, so he could talk to her about *her*, or school, or them. He was tired of being trapped in Leblanc, even if he knew it was safe there. He was tired of living through calls and texts in the absence of human contact. He wanted to hug her, to hold her hand, to make her smile...

He figured the only way he was going to catch her would be directly. Ren approached where Makoto was speaking with Minako and Yukari, but he didn't reach them in time.

"I'm sure he's okay, Minako. You just need to believe in him."

Right. Sanada was still recovering in the hospital after being *killed*. What right did Ren have to steal Makoto away from him? For even a minute? Makoto seemed eager to go visit her dad, and the last thing Ren was going to do was stop her.

"Be safe, Makoto," was his pitiful attempt to grab her attention. All three women looked over at him, and Ren could feel his face warm in shame. He was acting like a child, desperate for attention. Makoto's world didn't revolve around him. A few days without her at

his side as she always had been in the past wouldn't break him. She had given him so much. Her father had given him so much...

Plus, he was tired, physically and mentally. It wouldn't be wise to linger.

But Makoto at least smiled at him, pushing away the storm clouds that threatened to wreak havoc on his unprotected heart. "I'll come by soon with your homework." Then, she looked away with a blush that made him weak. "H-Have a good night...Ren..."

It may not have been enough, but her beautiful smile would keep him the nightmares away for the night.

Chapter 176

Chapter 176

Goodness this story has totaled a lot of words 😎.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

The more time he spent in isolation, the more he was going to go insane.

Mitsuru told him that his family couldn't come see him regularly or people would get suspicious. It angered Akihiko greatly, since his doctor still wanted to keep him around in case something happened. In fact, the only time Minako and Makoto had spoken to him had been right after he woke up…

He still hadn't heard from Sae, if she was angry with him, if she was relieved he was alive, or anything. That thought alone made him toss and turn for days. Without Minako to tell him it was okay, that Sae really did care, he assumed the worst. He couldn't sleep. He couldn't get comfortable. He had been laying in a bed for far too long and he needed to get out. At the same time, he wanted the medication to knock him out so he wouldn't have to deal with his thoughts, his fear of death, that what ifs of the future.

Days of tormenting himself over what had happened and where that left his family pushed him over the edge. Akihiko ripped out the IV from his arm and threw himself out of the bed. Standing on his feet again made him feel weak, and he had to catch himself on the bed before he fell over onto the floor. There was an alarm that sounded, quiet, but constant, making his ears ring and his body tense. He didn't make it far, if maybe one or two steps, before his doctor came rushing into the room.

The man pitied him; Akihiko could tell from his reaction. After he got Akihiko to sit down (he was extremely dizzy, so it was easy to do without much of a fight), his doctor took a seat on the only other piece of furniture in the room.

“I know you hate being here. I know you’re probably terrified that you survived death. Truth be told, it freaked me out, too.” The other man sighed and rested his hands on his knees. “Kirijo-san has to work out details so you can leave unnoticed. Not everyone here is aware you’re alive, nor are they all on our side. So please, hang in there.”

Akihiko gripped at the sheets under him. “Hang in there? I’m losing my fucking mind! I want to see my kids! I want to see Minako! You can’t keep me here! Let the world know I’m alive! I have to get out of here!”

“*This* is exactly why you’re still here.” Akihiko glared at him, but he only shook his head, unafraid. “You might be recovering physically, but mentally, you’re falling apart.”

“And you think keeping me locked up in this damn room is going to make me get better?!”

His doctor held up a hand to keep him quiet. “No, I don’t. You never were one to stay down for long. But I know you know that deep down, you can’t blow your cover. You’ve been fighting this war for months, Sanada. And every time you come here after falling, you leave stronger. This is clearly different than all the other times, and I’m not asking you to recover to fight again. But I want you to remember why you were fighting to begin with and try and remain calm and patient.”

He lifted his hands to his hair and pulled painfully. Patient? He had been patient long enough. He’d rather be *dead* than live like this. What kind of life was worth fighting for if he couldn’t be with the people he loved the most?

“Why don’t you just let me die then?”

His doctor had the nerve to chuckle at him, but when he replied, he was serious. “Because you’ve never once taken the easy way out.

You're better than that."

He left Akihiko after a quick check up, leaving him once again alone with his rampant thoughts. The one time he wanted to give up, everyone still depended on him to fight back. There were other people out there who could do the same in his place. Why did everyone expect *him* to always jump back into the fray when everyone else would have quit?

Deep down, he knew why. Because he expected better of himself. Even if there was someone he could have trusted with every little bit of information at the police station, someone who basically was him (maybe a little younger, too), it wouldn't be enough. *He* had to fight. *He* would protect his family. *He* had to take the brunt of the work so his children could have a better life.

Akihiko ran his hands over his face. He had died. Where would the world be if Minako hadn't brought him back? What kind of toll did that take on her? Or Sae? Or Makoto? How was he supposed to go back to his normal routine when he had a scar on his chest to remind him that he had been killed? How was he supposed to look in Minako's eyes, or either of his kids', and not feel like he could have lost everything that day? How would they look at him?

He needed Minako more than ever, and she wasn't allowed to see him…

Another part of him grew sick knowing that Minako likely felt the same, and he couldn't be there for her…

He tried to think of a million other things to keep that guilt from swallowing him whole. He would at least be able to talk to Sae, hopefully. He could watch Makoto graduate and go on to college, then the police academy. He could take Minako all the places she wanted to go. There was still something he could give them, and he sure as hell couldn't do that if he was *dead*.

The clock slowly became his enemy again. Akihiko would glance at the time every hour, then every half hour, to almost every minute. He began to panic again, feeling trapped in such a small room with no one to break him out of his thoughts. He tried to think of all the

places Minako had told him she wanted to travel to, but the moment he couldn't think of a place, the silence pressed harder against his chest. Nothing could keep him from drowning while the damn clock continued to tick like it was laughing at him.

He sat up to catch his breath when he thought he heard someone at the door. In his state of panic, he didn't know who it was, but he didn't really care. Anyone would distract his thoughts, and he needed to escape his mind before it destroyed him.

When Mitsuru came into the room, Akihiko was slightly disappointed. He really wanted to see Minako. "I understand you're giving your doctor a run for his money."

In response, he narrowed his eyes at her. "I want to see my family."

"I know." Mitsuru took her seat on the chair, and he worried that she was only there to talk to him and not take him home. "I'm hoping to get you out of here today. We have much to catch you up on."

He dropped his head back down into the pillow. "I don't want to be caught up on anything. I just want to see my family."

The silence nearly crushed him, because he knew Mitsuru was stalling on purpose. She gave him that look, one that made him grow more attentive and anxious to know what she was hiding.

"Sae contacted me earlier."

Akihiko felt his heart slam into his ribs.

Mitsuru was at least kind enough to continue. "The SIU director suffered a mental shutdown this morning as he was about to tell her what was going on in this conspiracy."

Her words pulled a great deal of energy from his body, and he felt like he sank further into the bed. The director? Akihiko had a feeling he wasn't a *good* guy, but he wasn't a personal threat. Maybe not to him. He did revoke Sae's access at work when she found out about Ziqiang when he had no right. He may not have posed a dangerous threat, but he may have just been another set of eyes and authority to keep Sae away from Akihiko so they could use her against him…

As if Akechi wasn't enough.

Even still, to eliminate him right before he was going to confess? Akechi sure liked to pick the best times to kill people.

"They're moving faster than we expected." Mitsuru frowned, giving off a frustrated sigh. "Shido is likely to replace him with one of his hand appointed men, causing more chaos than we need right now."

Akihiko exhaled deeply. A part of him didn't care, or he didn't want to care right now. He wanted to go home, to sleep next to Minako, to talk to Makoto about her day, and maybe see if there was a chance he could speak to Sae himself.

"Is…is Sae okay?"

Mitsuru seemed surprised by his question, or his tone, he didn't know. "She's shook up, but she's going to be fine. Shido's men were able to sell the director's death as a stroke. No one is questioning that, nor do they seem concerned over who will take his place."

Sae was okay. That was all that mattered to him. While the director dying wasn't a *good* thing, it was hard for Akihiko to pity him when he tried to screw over his own daughter.

"There is…something else I would like to tell you."

Very rarely did Mitsuru fight over her choice of words. It made him oddly curious to know what she wanted to say. "Something wrong?"

He watched her close her eyes, exhale, repeat a few more times, until she finally got words out into the open. "I believe Apathy Syndrome is making its return."

That hadn't been anything he expected her to say. "What?"

She fell back into her seat, defeated, while he continued to let the gravity of her statement sink in. "It's only a speculation. More and more people are becoming less and less involved in society. No one seemed to care about a child committing suicide in a police station. No one seems to care about a powerful figurehead of the law dying without a replacement. Minako and Makoto were attacked by…"

Mitsuru came to a stop, but then Akihiko realized why. “W-Wait, *what?!”*

He was throwing himself out of the bed before Mitsuru could push herself to her feet. “Akihiko, stop. They’re fine. This happened a few nights back. I apologize. I knew telling you would send you into a frenzy.”

“Who the hell went after them?! Akechi?!”

“No.” Mitsuru sighed again, rubbing the sides of her head like she had a headache. “They were attacked by people who appeared to act similarly to the Lost in our time.”

His head was spinning. He at least found comfort knowing Sae was okay, but it was quickly replaced with the fear that Minako and Makoto had been *attacked* and he couldn’t do anything to help them.

“And I also believe that this is due in part to Minako awakening to her powers.”

That set him off. “The hell are you trying to say? You’re blaming her for nearly sacrificing herself to save me, to save my daughter?! How can you-,”

“That’s not at all what I’m trying to say.” She looked away, making him feel slightly guilty for his outburst. Mitsuru wasn’t always the best with words. He knew that. She would never point blame unless it was at herself. “I’m just…concerned for what all of this means. I apologize for sounding harsh and inconsiderate.”

Akihiko lowered himself to sit at the edge of the bed. “No, I’m sorry.” He threw his face into his hands, feeling a pressure building up behind his eyes that was only growing stronger. “This is just…a lot to digest right now.”

He felt her place a hand on his shoulder. “You’re right. I shouldn’t be bothering you with more worries when I need to get you home to your family.”

Her voice sounded genuine, but he knew Mitsuru long enough to know when she was upset. “If you get me home, I will help you. I

know you're getting into your own head like I am, but…I really want to see my family. It will help me calm down, and I'll be able to help you get your answers."

She chuckled dryly as she removed her hand. "You've always been a pillar of support, Akihiko."

He shook the compliment off easily enough. "Please. I feel more like dead weight half the time."

"I truly am grateful she brought you back. I'd rather deal with a full return of Apathy Syndrome and Shido's unending conspirators than have lost you as a friend."

Despite himself, he felt his face flush as he pushed himself back to his feet. "Yeah, yeah, I get it. Can I please get out of here?"

Mitsuru smiled with a nod of her head, then returned to the chair to lift a bag off the floor. Before he could blink, she threw it at him, hitting him in the stomach. It wasn't heavy, but it wasn't light. He had to pick it up off the ground, but then he shot a look to Mitsuru. "What's this?"

"You can't seriously believe you're leaving looking like that, can you?"

Well, no, he didn't. Slowly, Akihiko opened the bag and found a simple change of clothes (nothing he owned, nor would ever wear in his life), and another small box inside. He heard another chuckle from Mitsuru as she approached him.

"I'll have Junpei follow you from a distance, but this should at least get you home without drawing unwanted attention."

He pulled out a shirt that *screamed* Junpei. Bright. Loud. Some stupid punchline written on the front. "Are you sure about that?"

She laughed again. "The Akihiko the world knows would never dress anything less than professional. So yes, I am."

There was a hat that didn't match any of what he was wearing. The small box contained what he thought were contacts, some make-up,

and a razor. His facial expression must have been priceless. He had never heard Mitsuru laugh so much in his life.

“Everyone pitched in to help. Yukari thought it best to be here to transform you into a different person, but, I knew you wouldn’t appreciate it.”

He held the razor up in the air. “Minako is going to be pissed if I shave now.”

“It will grow back.”

He swiped the bag off the bed with a scowl to Mitsuru, who only grinned as he turned his back. However, he did feel much lighter now than he had all week. He was going to be going home, and he would do anything and dress however he had to to get there. Minako would probably be ecstatic to see him regardless of how he looked. He was going *home.*

Akihiko did make a mental note to punch Junpei and Ken in the face, since he was sure the entire outfit had been their doing. He looked like a gangster he would arrest on the street, not someone who fought half his life to be where he was now. The only reason he wouldn’t kill them both had been because it did make him look a few years younger. That was nice.

Still, he was uncomfortable. Would he attract attention because he was trying *not* to attract attention? He was going to go home, and no one dressed like him would likely leave the apartment building. Someone there was bound to question him. How much surveillance did Shido have on him? Did he know where Akihiko lived, or at least the part of town he lived? He’d like to think Shido would have tried to kill him earlier if he had known.

Maybe not. Maybe that was why he sent Akechi to kill people in the Metaverse. No one would be able to prove it. A house invasion could lead to the right people finding evidence to use against him.

“Well, had I caught you outside, I would never guess that was you.”

Akihiko rolled his eyes. “I am not wearing the make-up. I couldn’t

deal with the contacts. If Ken and Junpei are missing tomorrow, it wasn't me."

Mitsuru waved her hand dismissively. "Nonsense. They did well. Torn clothing had never been your style. Shido's men will be none the wiser." Then, she lost her humor and turned serious again. "Fuuka will disengage the emergency exit for you to go through when she texts you. From there, you're going to walk to Minami Station, where we have a taxi waiting for you. It will drive you to Daikan-yama Station, and you will walk home from there."

He released his breath loudly. "That sounds like a hassle."

"I would prefer to keep you off the main trains in case people notice you." She pulled out her phone, her fingers quick to send a message to someone. "We cannot afford to have your cover blown. I'm not taking any chances."

He could appreciate that enough, and he was going home. If she asked him to run halfway across the country to circle back, he would. He was going home!

His escape from the hospital felt weird, but as soon as Fuuka disabled the door to his freedom, Akihiko inhaled the fresh air and almost collapsed to the ground. He was alive. He was going home. He would never take something as precious as *fresh air* for granted again. The energy from the city gave him energy. The people hustling about gave him more energy. A buzz in his pocket snapped him out of it, reaching for it to find a message from Mitsuru. She sent him detailed directions on how to get to a station he wasn't familiar with, and he was quick to push himself ahead.

Soon, he'd be home. He'd be able to hold Minako and tell her he loved her. He'd see Makoto and hold her and tell her he loved her, too. Sae could come over so they could talk about her work and maybe their past and he could tell her he loved her then…

He learned about two blocks into his trek that his body was not used to moving or expending energy on something as basic as walking. Akihiko tried to slow down his pace, likely too excited to return home that he didn't notice he was walking fast. At every intersection he

had to stop at, he tried to catch his breath without drawing attention from the group of people he was around. He tugged the bill of the hat more over his face when he was stopped, worried someone close to him would be one of Shido's men. It was nice to know that everyone was more invested in their phones than on a man who was deemed dead and walking around among them.

To his surprise, no one stopped to talk to him, ask him who he was or why he looked (and felt) so out of place. He never felt like someone was watching him, even as alert as he thought he was. The taxi driver was the only person who spoke to him, asking him where he wanted to go, and Akihiko responded as Mitsuru had told him to.

Then, half an hour later, he was standing right outside his apartment building for the first time in a week. There was a burn behind his eyes and he remained frozen in place, unable to take that final step forward to make him the happiest man who survived death. After what felt like hours, with the sun setting behind the buildings and a cold breeze passing through, Akihiko found that motivation to pick up one foot, then another, until he was inside, up the elevator, and in front of his door.

Mitsuru had handed him his keys before he left, but it was the hardest thing to do right then. He didn't know why. He wanted to be home. He wanted to see his family. And yet, the longer he stood at the front door, the more the air thickened and pressed down on his shoulders until he was sure he was going to fall through the floor.

He had been *dead*. But he was alive. Minako saved him. He was *dead*.

Open the damn door.

"You're alive, because she loves you."

Akihiko slammed his fist into the door, hoping that would get his muscles to relax and his mind to stop spinning so he could open the damn door! Would Minako be home? Had he just scared her into thinking he was another person there to attack her? That shook him up, and it was the jolt he needed to reach for his keys and unlock

the door.

“M-Minako?”

The apartment was silent. Dark. Still. He could hear his heart hammering away in his chest. The door clicking shut behind him nearly gave him a heart attack. His entire body was tense again, waiting for something, or someone, to come out of the shadows and finish him off for good.

“Minako?”

There was no response. Only darkness. He began to find it difficult to breathe, to move, to shake the terror paralyzing him. Was this another trick? Was he dead? Was his family dead? Had Akechi and Shido won? What was even real anymore?

In a panic, Akihiko ran into the living room, the kitchen, then down the hall to each of the three bedrooms, looking for signs of life. He couldn’t remember how the apartment had looked before he left, but they tried to keep a tidy place. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Makoto’s room was normal. His room was normal. The empty room that once belonged to Sae was normal.

But no one was there.

He ran back out into the living room and started searching again. He tried looking for any signs they had been there recently, either by food recently cooked and in the fridge to the blankets tossed lazily across the couch. Then, he tried rummaging around in the bedrooms, hoping to find schoolwork that belonged to Makoto, or hospital paperwork that Minako had to have received for her stay.

He was shaking, dropping containers from the fridge, the books in Makoto’s room, the papers sitting on his own desk. The apartment was trashed in a matter of an hour, but no matter where he looked for signs that he was alive and his family was alive, he found *no one*.

Mitsuru wouldn’t have sent him home if there was no one to return to. There was no way all of this was a dream. He had to have been in some sort of shock, and he was trying to ground himself by

whatever means he could. But it wasn't enough. Minako was missing. Makoto was missing. They could have been taken away from him while he was recovering in the hospital. Mitsuru may not even know they were missing!

In a move he probably should have started with, Akihiko pulled out his phone to call Minako. His fingers couldn't even move across the phone steadily enough to pull up her contact information. Instead, he yelled at nothing, threw his phone into the darkness, and fell back against the closest wall and to the ground.

They were gone.

His body was reacting to the sense of loss.

He should have been there for them…

"Aki?"

Hearing his name, Akihiko snapped his head up, having to bite back another scream. Then, his world came back into focus, his eyes landing on a splitting image of Minako. She appeared to be confused, scared, but *real*. She was alive. She was home…

She came to sit in front of him, her hands on his face as her eyes searched his. "A-Are you okay?"

"Dad?"

He didn't question anything. He threw his arms around her shoulders and held onto her like even the slightest breeze would take her away from him. She felt real. She smelled real. She held him with that strength she always would when he was feeling weak and afraid.

There were tears in his eyes, and he could feel hers on his skin. "Y-You're alive…"

She cried against him and tightened her grip on him. Makoto came to stand at the end of the end of the hallway, tears lining her eyes, and she was soon to follow after her mother and wrapped her arms around them both.

“I thought you were dead,” he repeated, and repeated again, until he felt his voice get trapped in his throat.

“We’re okay, Aki.” Minako leaned back to hold his face in her hands. He loved her so much. “You’re here. We’re here. It’s okay.”

He pulled both Minako and Makoto back into his chest. Nothing could come out of his mouth, but they didn’t seem to mind. They just continued to sit in the middle of the hallway, their home a mess, and cried well into the night.

Thank you all for reading!!

Chapter 177

Chapter 177

A little bit on the shorter side, but sometimes, you can't push yourself to write more than necessary

Thank you all again for reading this monster!

“When you face God, you will know true fear.”

Minako shot awake, then struggled to grasp where she was and why she was in pain. She was warm, and laying on something comfortable, although she was in an awkward position. The darkness scared the hell out of her, and she quickly pushed herself away from that warmth to get her mind turning. Was she back in the abyss? Did she ever leave?

“Minako?”

Another groan got her to focus and slowly remember where she was. They had gone out to Shido’s palace a few hours ago. Makoto walked her home. No one attacked her in the streets. Then they stepped inside the unlocked apartment and got the scare of their lives. Minako swore they were going to be ambushed in their own home for the first time in their lives…

Then she found Akihiko crouched down on the floor in the hallway. At least, Minako thought it was him. He was wearing a shirt she would *never* see in his wardrobe. A bill of a hat was pulled over his face, and he didn’t like to wear anything on his head. (Because she knew he liked it when she could run her fingers through his hair. It was also why he never cut his hair too short, either.) In fact, the only reason she *knew* it had been him and not some intruder had been because she recognized the wedding ring on his finger.

Her heart clenched painfully in her chest. Nothing else mattered to her then. Makoto's initial reaction was to make sure no one else was with him in case he had been attacked, but her daughter did a quick sweep of the house and found nothing. Minako dropped to her knees next to Akihiko, called out to him several times, and then saw the look on his face.

"I don't know if he would be able to handle another night there."

She held him as close as she possibly could, terrified for his wellbeing. The thoughts that must have gone through his head when he arrived home to an empty apartment had to have been destructive. With no sign of a break in, *he* had to have lost his grip on reality and tried to cling to any hope they were even alive.

It would explain the chaos Minako and Makoto returned home to, but it didn't make it any easier to accept. It broke her heart. She shouldn't have left that day. She should have waited for him. She was just so *angry* and wanted her chance to *kill* Shido for what he had done…

"A-Are you okay?"

They were still on the floor, where she assumed all three of them had fallen asleep an hour or two ago. Makoto stirred next to her, trying to either get comfortable or get up. Minako couldn't blame her, and she thought it was best for each of them to get some sleep on a bed rather than the floor.

"I'm okay," she said quietly. Akihiko exhaled quickly, almost relieved to hear her voice, and that knife dug itself deeper into her heart. She didn't want to get up now, perfectly content to just be in his arms and live the rest of her life right where she was…

Makoto was the first one to stand up and stretch out her back. "It's really late. We should um…get some sleep…"

Minako felt Akihiko nod his head into her shoulder, but he made no move to get up himself. She worried if she broke that bubble and left his arms, he would crumble and be lost forever. Makoto held out her hand towards them, but neither her nor Akihiko made a move for it.

“I-I promise you’ll be more comfortable…on the couch or the bed…”

She was trying to get them to move, to realize things were fine (for the moment), and Akihiko wasn’t about to be taken away from her again. Sadly, he was the one who finally lifted his arm so Makoto could grasp it, and Makoto had a hell of a time pulling them to their feet. However, the sadness on her face and in her eyes managed to snap Minako out of the haze building around her.

“Thank you, Makoto,” was all she could say. It was late. Her hand was wrapped tightly around Akihiko’s wrist, terrified to let go and watch him disappear forever. Makoto wrapped her arms around them again, then released them before heading to stand in the middle of the living room. Without a word, she started pulling books and papers off the ground, organizing everything neatly in her arms, then looking around the room for their home.

Akihiko’s voice startled her. “Stop, Makoto. I-I’ll get it.”

Makoto turned to meet her father’s eyes, then shook her head. “It’s okay. I don’t mind.”

Minako was slowly pulled into the living room with Akihiko, still clinging to his hand. “Really. It’s okay. You should get some sleep.”

There was a soft chuckle from their daughter. “How many times did you guys have to clean up after me when I made a huge mess as a child?” Her eyes danced with amusement, and Minako felt her heart jump into her throat. “I think I owe you one or two free passes.”

Tears threatened to spill from her eyes, but Minako fought them off by lifting a hand to Makoto’s shoulder. “You actually owe us several free passes. I can’t tell you how many times I had to clean up the kitchen after you tried and failed to find my secret stash of chocolate.”

A small, barely noticeable blush came to her face. “Well…I-I guess I could…”

“Go to sleep, Makoto. I’ll clean this up.”

The sternness in Akihiko’s tone made Makoto drop her head to her

chest. Minako turned to him, but when his free hand flew to his face and into his hair, she knew he hadn't meant it. He was probably tired. Frustrated. Afraid. The last thing he wanted in his life was for anyone to *know* he was falling apart.

She tried to make Makoto understand that. "It's late, and you have school tomorrow, honey. You can make it up to us later, alright?"

Whether or not Makoto relented because she was tired or sensed the tension mounting, she didn't know. Minako felt a slight tug at her heart strings when she watched her daughter hang her head, place the stack of books she had gathered on the table, and turned to walk down the hall.

Minako couldn't even wish her a goodnight, or tell her that she loved her, or *anything*…

"Why did you save me?"

Akihiko spoke with that same tone he had spoken to Makoto with, and it honestly shook her up. Her eyes found him running his hand through his hair, over his face, like he had a million thoughts running through his head. Deep down, Minako had feared he would ask her, but sadly for him, she didn't have a good answer.

"I-I just…" Her hand fell from his, the realization of what he was asking hitting her square in the chest. "I saw you laying on the ground. I couldn't wake you up. I…I blacked out. I just kept telling myself over and over that you were dead and…"

"You should have focused on Sae."

The tears she had fought back earlier made their way to her eyes again. "I-I know…I'm sorry. But you were *dead.* I watched you fall to the ground. I watched you take your last breath. I felt a part of *me* die and I…I just…"

She felt his arms wrap around, which caught her off-guard, but it wasn't unwelcoming. "I'm sorry. I'm terrified. I'm losing my mind. I was *dead."*

Minako cried softly into his chest, her fingers curling into the back of

his shirt. “I can’t live my life without you. I can’t…we can’t, Aki…”

They didn’t speak for what felt like hours. She started to feel a headache forming behind her eyes, but she didn’t want to leave Akihiko’s arms. She knew he was a mess, he was afraid of how he was feeling, he was afraid to be *alive* again, so if she pulled away from him now, he would fall apart. She had just got him back. She wouldn’t lose him now.

“Everything is going to be okay, Aki,” she whispered as softly as she could. “I’m right here. I won’t leave you. You’re going to be okay.”

He slowly started to lean against her as if he was losing his strength the more they stood in the middle of the mess he had made. Minako was careful in maneuvering around the room to help lower him to the couch without ever letting him go. Once they were sitting, he dropped his head to her shoulder, occasionally muttering an apology as she ran her fingers through his hair.

She couldn’t imagine what he went through, or what it was like to *be* dead and then brought back to life. She could understand to some degree, but she never really died. Did he float around in darkness like she had done when she was comatose all those years ago? Would he start spiraling if she asked him?

“Mitsuru told me you summoned Thanatos again.”

Minako blinked and a sense of clarity came over her. It was weird. Then again, given the hell of her last few days, nothing was easy to understand. “S-She did?”

“And that you were attacked by people resembling the Lost because of it.”

Great. In an effort to keep him from losing his mind *again*, she now felt like she was about to start losing hers. Akihiko must have sensed the tension in her muscles as he pushed himself off her shoulder to look at her. “Minako?”

But if he was there for a reason, it was because he was her foundation. Her best friend. Her other half. Her worries were his.

There was no need to hold back in front of him. “I…I passed out after summoning a persona to save you,” she started hesitantly. “I felt myself swimming in that abyss again, and I saw Ryoji, and he told me that God was going to kill me. And Theo told me that, too.”

Her words started to fly from her mouth the more she lost herself in that weird dream. “Thanatos has the power God is trying to eliminate, and since he’s somehow back with me, God has to take me out. He could very well be sending the Lost out to kill me, or he could be toying with me so I can go down into the abyss to face him…”

She felt hands on her face, pulling her from her rampant thoughts and back to a place where she knew she was safe. “You’re safe here. It’s okay.”

Her hands covered his and she leaned in to rest her head against his, suddenly exhausted. “I’m terrified, if I’m being honest. But it’s worth it to have you back with me now.”

He breathed out a laugh, and it made her relax. Until, “I saw them. I saw Shinji and my sister, and my partner.”

He didn’t let her pull away in shock, but his eyes closed instead of looking at her. “W-What?”

“Shinji told me I didn’t belong there. That I still had work to do, so I couldn’t stay. My sister was the one who told me that I was alive, because you loved me.”

If she had lived a normal life and he had told her this, she would have thought him crazy. She actually did think it was crazy to hear him say. How could he have spoken to people who were really *dead?* Even if Akihiko had died for however long, how had he managed to see them? And speak to them?

…Was that why he had asked about why she brought him back, because he missed them? “Do…did you want to stay…with them?”

Minako didn’t even realize she had asked the question out loud until Akihiko reeled back. He thankfully didn’t give her time to think about

what his reaction had meant. “No. Sorry. I guess I kinda don’t know what I’m talking about.”

She knew exactly how he felt. “I don’t want there to be secrets between us anymore. I don’t want to lose you and have so much to say to you. I don’t want you to have so much to still say to me.”

Akihiko returned to his earlier position as he leaned forward against her. “I know. I was scared in the hospital, worried it was all an illusion, worried I really was dead and I would never see you or the kids again. I spent days thinking I was in some sort of messed up hell. And then I finally get my chance to come home, and no one is here. B-But...but now you are. You’re here, Minako. I won’t waste this chance you’ve given me. Even if it might be hard…”

She lifted her arms around his shoulders. Her eyes began to burn again. “I wouldn’t be able to make it through the rest of my life without you. I don’t want to, Aki.”

His body shook with a light laugh. “Maybe we should just spend the rest of our lives in this house with each other and let the world fight for itself. We’ve done enough.”

Minako smiled into his chest and kept her mouth shut. Akihiko was never one to talk about giving up, even if he didn’t come right out and say those exact words. Over the year, she had watched him grow bitter and angry after he had been kidnapped, but he fought through that fear to help someone in need. He could say whatever he wanted, but she knew he would keep fighting until the end.

“I won’t let some god take you away from me.”

He squeezed her, almost to the point it hurt. He likely took her silence the wrong way, thinking that she didn’t already know he was going to fight for his family, with or without the danger looming over their heads. She would love to stay at home with him, or travel with him, like any normal happy couple would be able to do.

Then again, their lives were far from normal. And if she had a normal life, she never would have met him. “I know, Aki. We’re going to fight, because while it will be hard, and dangerous, we have each

other. We have our kids. We have our friends. We can do this."

"Maybe for a day or two, we can forget about everything." He spoke so quietly that she barely heard him. "All I want is to be here with you. Everything else can wait. At least for a day."

Minako knew better than to deny him, or herself really, their time together. She didn't think he would be so gung-ho about returning to the front lines, but she didn't think he would want to remain on the sidelines for long. A few days. Maybe a week. Mitsuru and the group of teens wouldn't need them right now, if at all. She'd give Akihiko all the time in the world if he needed it.

"December is next week," she added with a soft touch of her lips to his head. "We will be able to decorate for Christmas as a family." She took a slow, deep breath to keep her emotions in check. "It's been years since we've been together. I'm so happy we're going to get this chance."

Akihiko stiffened slightly, but enough to make Minako release a chuckle. "Aki, you fought for over a year to see this day happen. I know Sae hasn't been able to see you, but I know she's going to be happy to talk to you again."

He dropped his head to her shoulder. "I…I don't know what to say to her…"

She returned to running her fingers through his hair to help calm him down. "You can say anything you want. You two used to critique Makoto's work, and I'm sure that would be a great way to break the ice."

"Do you really think she will come?"

Without skipping a beat, she replied, "Of course. I think she needs a day or two to gather her thoughts as well. But she'll be here."

There was a comfortable silence that fell around them. Minako kept her hand moving through his hair, over his neck, down his back, until she thought for sure he was asleep. As soon as she thought that, he jerked in her arms and shot his head up, eyes wide and breathing

heavily. It scared her, but she knew exactly why he had reacted the way he did.

It was the same reason she hadn't slept in days. The second she closed her eyes and was surrounded by the darkness, she thought she was back in that space, unable to move or talk, and she was alone.

"It's okay, Aki." She never stopped moving her hand, but her other one landed on the side of his face to force him to look at her. "You're here. You're okay. I'm okay."

It took him a few seconds to understand her words and allow them to sink in. She knew she had reached him when he fell into her, his head colliding with her shoulder. He said nothing, but she could feel his breathing even back out and his muscles relax as he grew comfortable against her.

However, the lack of conversation was suffocating her. She didn't want to sleep, knowing full well what would be waiting for her as soon as she passed out. Even if she was exhausted, and Akihiko was back with her again, it could all be a dream. If she closed her eyes, she could wake up and he would be gone.

"Some of those kids are excited to see you fight with your persona."

It was the only thing she could think of to talk about. It was too soon to discuss, since he had just told her he wanted time to recover. But in her defense, he had something to look forward to.

To her relief, he chuckled. "Sakamoto is going to lose his mind."

It brough a smile to her face. He could have told her he would never fight with Caesar again, or do anything, but he didn't. In time, he would fight. And she was sure he would impress everyone.

"He did seem like he was the one most looking forward to working with you. He fights with an electric persona, too." She wrapped her arms around his back and held him closer to her. "Maybe that's why the two of you connected like you did."

He stirred in her arms. "Y-You know his persona?"

Minako had assumed Mitsuru had told him about their investigation into Shido and visiting his palace, but, maybe not. “We went into Shido’s palace today. That’s…that was where we were before we came home.”

She allowed him to pull away from her, but her arms were still draped over his shoulders. “Y-You went to his palace?”

With a subtle nod to her head, she added, “I wanted to go in and kill him. That was all I could think about. How he’s taken too much from you, from this family, and I wanted to personally be there to introduce myself before I tore him to pieces.” She sighed heavily. “But it doesn’t work that way.”

His hands moved to her shoulders and he pushed her back gently. “You went in by yourself, or with the others?”

A small smile appeared on her face that seemed to put him at ease. “We all went together. The Phantom Thieves. Our team. We got our first taste of what the children do, and I’m sure they would appreciate all the help they can get.” When she caught the exhaustion creeping onto his face, she pulled him back into her chest. “But you need your rest first. They’ll be fine for a few days. I promise.”

“Does Shido think I’m dead?”

“To be honest, I don’t know.” Just thinking about that man made Minako want to punch something. “No one really seems to be talking about it. At least, from what I know. Things could be very different at the station. But I’m sure Shido is feeling confident now that you and Ren are supposedly *dead*.”

A small grumble escaped his lips and Minako couldn’t stop the giggle that came from hers. “Oh don’t be like that. I think Ren would make a great son-in-law.”

“Stop that.”

“You said you would be okay with grandchildren if that was what Makoto truly wanted years from now.”

“I don’t remember saying that, and even if I did, I never said with him.”

“You like him.”

Akihiko didn’t answer her.

“I always wonder what would have happened to you had you had to have met my parents.”

Again, Akihiko tensed, but he shook it off quickly. “I would like to think nothing would have changed. Unless you think they would have hated me.”

“My dad probably would have tried to scare you, I’m not going to lie,” she said with a laugh. “Thankfully, my mother was pretty good at keeping him from being too intimidating.”

The conversations started to become more random. Minako would mention all her travels as a child, and Akihiko would talk about his travels in South America that she didn’t know about. She asked him off-the-wall questions; he gave her the craziest of answers. She tried to keep poking fun at him about Ren and Makoto and their possible future while he tried to derail that topic by wondering how many punches Ren could take before he spent the rest of his life in a hospital bed.

It was like nothing had ever happened. Like she hadn’t watched a teenager put a bullet through Akihiko’s heart. Like she hadn’t had to watch both Sae and Makoto fall apart because their father was technically *dead*. Like the past wasn’t repeating itself and she was in great danger herself.

It was just the two of them, losing themselves in each other and the stupid asinine conversations that made her fall in love with him all over again.

Chapter 178

Chapter 178

It’s officially December. Wow. Meaning it’s time for Christmas decorations and beer.

And time to update this story. Even if this chapter got away from me.

Makoto was getting used to sleeping for less than four hours a night.

It didn’t make her any less exhausted, or any less frustrated when her alarm went off by her head. The only thing that motivated her to get out of bed had been that she didn’t know if she had dreamt the night before or if it had really happened.

Her and her mom had come home to find the apartment ransacked. Makoto had prepared for an ambush, or for someone to come out from the shadows, even after they found her dad slumped over in the hall. After making sure everything was safe, she slowly started to understand what had happened. Her dad had come home and freaked out, which she sadly couldn’t blame him after what he had been through.

Was he okay? Or was that just her mind playing tricks on her since she hadn’t been sleeping well?

She didn’t bother to get changed and quickly rushed out of her room to check on her parents. Their bedroom door was open, and no one was inside, but then she remembered they were going to clean up the apartment, so maybe they didn’t get a chance to go to bed. The two seconds it took for her to run down the hall were the longest two seconds of her life.

But her parents were on the couch, asleep, and the room was still a mess.

Makoto didn't care. They were okay. That was all that mattered to her.

She thought it best to let them get their sleep, knowing her mom (and probably her dad) hadn't slept well in days. She could easily fend for herself for breakfast or grab something quick on the way to school. As she started to get ready for school, she heard her phone go off on the stand by her bed.

It was a simple text. From Ren. His usual morning routine. *Good morning my Queen <3*

It brought a small smile to her face. Makoto had been tempted to tell him about what had happened that night with her dad, but it had been late. And she didn't think it was necessary to worry about. It was a natural response. She would have lost her mind had she been *dead* and suddenly alive and returned home to an empty house, too…

She replied with her own message. *Good morning. Please make sure to get your rest today. I'll be sure to ask Ann for your assignments so you don't fall too far behind in your studies.*

Makoto had just placed her phone back down when he responded. *As long as you tutor me ^v^*

Really, how could he type so quickly and act like he wasn't forced to live a life of isolation? Maybe she needed to be more positive, given she had a million things to be happy about right now. Ren was alive. Her dad was alive. Her sister was alive. They were going to be taking Shido down within the next few weeks.

But there was still so much that could go wrong.

Makoto shook her head and finished her morning routine. Her dad was allowed to be scared now. He didn't have to fight with them; he had done enough. Plus, she knew she could fight without him. He couldn't always support her. He wasn't always going to be there.

She wasn't alone anymore, she reminded herself as she clasped her father's pendant around her neck. She had her friends, her parents, and her parents' friends all working together. Shido, Akechi, *God*, no one would be able to defeat them now. Everything would be okay.

Makoto was tempted to wake her parents just so she could tell them she was leaving, and that she loved them. They were still asleep when she came into the living room, so she wrote them a note and placed it on the closest table to them. Whether or not they heard her, she did whisper a quiet, "I love you," before she walked out the door.

The entire time from the moment she left the apartment, Makoto kept her eyes open for Akechi. Or someone who might attack her like what had happened the other day when she was walking home with her mom. Or someone who just *looked* out of place. It was a blessing in disguise that she made it to school on time, with no confrontations, just slightly more tense than usual.

The school day, however, seemed to drag. She received a few messages from Ren in between classes and lunch, all of them a simple check-in or some cute, witty comment. Makoto sent a message to her mom and her dad to see if they were okay, and she was relieved when she got a text from them saying they were fine, they appreciated her note, and they loved her.

Makoto also kept up on the group chat between her friends, which now (thanks to Futaba) included Mitsuru and her team. They had plans to return to the palace after school. Mitsuru had arranged for them to be picked up and taken to the Diet Building in separate cars to keep attention off a big group. Ken, Haru, and Ann would leave directly from school while Makoto and Ryuji would be picked up at the station. Ken would make sure they at least got to the station safely before his group left the school, and Ryuji was never one to linger after class, which meant she couldn't stay after class for student council business.

It was for the best. Her mind was running too fast for her to be of any use to the students.

Ryuji was kind enough to wait for her in the lobby of the school. He

saw her approaching and lowered his phone with an odd smile on his face. “Dude, I still can’t get over the fact you’re Sanada’s daughter.”

Makoto put a finger to her lips to silence him. He was lucky that there were students around him rushing to leave and taking no interest in their peers’ conversations. “Don’t say that so loud.”

“My bad.” He didn’t appear to be offended, or even surprised by her request. “Now I’m just glad I never did nothin’ to make you mad or anything. I would have hated for him to come down my throat.”

She chose not to respond to him, more because she didn’t want to have the conversation with students passing by. Her dad was supposed to be *dead*. She couldn’t trust anyone except her friends who *knew*. If Akechi had ears at Shujin and told them who to pay attention to, they could easily expose their plans.

“Let’s get moving.”

Again, Ryuji didn’t seem to mind either way and began following after her. In a way, it was awkward. He wasn’t someone she was extremely close with, but he was very close to her dad. It was weird, but that relationship he had with her dad made her feel like Ryuji was now her younger brother.

“Where’d ya learn to fight like that? You don’t really punch a lot.”

Makoto hadn’t expected Ryuji to take any sort of interest in her fighting style, or even her as a person. But at least he was keeping her distracted. That she could appreciate. “I actually learned from my sister. She helped trained me, and she excelled in aikido at a young age.”

“Ah.” Ryuji threw his hands into his pockets, leaving Makoto scrambling to ask *one* question about him.

The only thing that came to her mind was, “How did you meet my dad?”

She asked as quietly as she could, but she was curious. Her dad never told her he even knew Ryuji. She didn’t even know Ryuji knew

her dad until a few months ago. How they had kept that relationship hidden from her, she would never know. Her dad was pretty good about keeping things to himself…

“Beef bowl.”

Ryuji’s honest answer made her stop in her tracks. “Beef bowl?”

The blond nodded his head. “Yeah. Caught me in a little scuffle with some asshole talkin’ shit a few years back. He was walkin’ me home when we passed that beef bowl shop in Shibuya, and we kinda just became friends.”

Makoto knew her dad had a way with the younger generation, but to bond with someone like Ryuji over *food* was impressive in her mind. Especially since Ryuji hated adults and their authority. Then again, maybe he only hated adults because he never met a nice one.

“My dad was abusive and a drunk and he kinda dipped on me and my mom. So he’s been like a father figure to me.” Ryuji then tapped her on the shoulder with an obnoxious grin. “Makes me sorta your little bro, right?!”

“I can’t say I ever wanted a younger sibling,” she said truthfully. Ryuji as a little brother? That was a crazy thought.

“Yeah, yeah! And then me and Ren can become bros for real!”

It was the second time in the span of five minutes that Ryuji successfully stopped her in her tracks. “W-What?”

He lost some of his enthusiasm and stared back at her, confused. “What? Aren’t you and Ren like, getting married one day or somethin’?”

The question floored her. Married? She was still in high school! She had to go to college and go to the academy and get a good job as a police officer before she thought about getting *married!* Why would Ryuji ask her something like that? Surely Ren needed a few years to get his life situated before the topic was brought up with any seriousness.

Still. It was an idea that wasn't anything she hadn't thought about before. She did love Ren, that much she knew. Did she want to get married? Sure. To Ren. Why not? *Soon?* No.

Trying to tell Ryuji as much with her jumbled thoughts was impossible, so she opted to ignore him and pick up her pace. The train ride from Aoyama was short, much too short for Makoto to push Ryuji's words from her mind. She desperately wanted to ask him something about himself to derail her thoughts, but she couldn't think of *what*. And how did Ryuji know that Ren wanted to marry her, one day, years from now...

...Did he? When that time came? Or would Ren move on and find someone better?

Makoto shook her head hard enough that Ryuji even commented on it. "You okay?"

She could feel her face burning. "I-I'm fine. S-Sorry."

"Ah, man!" Ryuji exclaimed once they were out of the station and on their way to the Diet building. "I hope I can fight with your old man! Just once!"

She chose not to respond, knowing all too well how her father had been feeling. She didn't want to break the news to Ryuji now. Regardless of if her dad fought with them or not, they wouldn't lose. Not after everything they had been through.

"Um, sorry..."

Ryuji's apology caught her off-guard. "Hmm?"

The frown on his face had her growing even more confused. "I mean, for bein' so excited. I always hated adults, and I sure as hell ain't gonna trust them, but your dad like, supported me. And trained me when I was hurt. So I just gotta say, we'll fight for him this time. To say thanks for protectin' us for so long."

He put his hand on her shoulder with a slight nod of his head when she met his eyes. All Makoto could do was smile back in response.

It also helped her mind focus on the *now* rather than the future. If she failed to be of any use to her friends and her family, there would be no future.

Right before they met up with the rest of their group, she told Ryuji, “Thank you,” and hoped he understood her sentiment.

Mitsuru and Ren took the lead inside the palace, both of them working side by side like they had been doing it all year long. Makoto was impressed that Mitsuru felt confident enough, but yet understanding enough to share that leadership role with a teenager. Or maybe it spoke more about Ren and his ability to work so efficiently with anyone. He truly was a fantastic leader.

Futaba and Fuuka stood off to her side, the younger chatting up a storm about her mysterious powers and how the Phantom Thieves wouldn’t have made it this far without her. Futaba also answered any and every question that Fuuka had asked, which Makoto was grateful for, as she had no idea what the two of them were discussing. She was sure they were talking about Akihabara and then Ken magically appeared at their side when “Featherman” was brought up…

“So no one here is actually here?”

Makoto tuned into the conversation she *could* understand. They had come to a stop in a hallway, Ren peeking around the corner to see what they would be up against. Yukari stood behind him, Morgana at her feet, and nodding to answer her question.

“Right. This is *Shido’s* cognition, or how he sees all of his subordinates. They might look real and have the same mannerisms, but they’re not the same.”

Makoto watched Yukari lean back against the wall. “I don’t think I’ll ever understand this world.”

“What matters now is that we procure the needed recommendation letters,” Mitsuru interrupted as Ren nodded to the rest of the group, signaling the coast was clear. “From what we’ve gathered, the politician closest to Shido is a man named Ooe. He will likely be the

one we need to gather the letter from first. As rumor has it, he dines at the restaurant just ahead."

Makoto really enjoyed working with Mitsuru. She was quick, effective, and great at keeping everyone on track. It did make her feel slightly *inadequate*, as that had often been *her* job, but it was also nice to have time to sit in the back and follow instead of lead.

Ren led the rather large group into the restaurant after crossing an expansive lounge area, but they were quickly held up by an older man at a host stand. Makoto watched on from the middle of their pack as Ren handed the man a card that they had managed to collect earlier. The man at the stand didn't even blink at their group, bowed politely, and ushered them towards the tables.

Ren was the first to speak. "That must be his table."

"Ah, man, I am *so* hungry!"

Makoto exhaled slowly, stopping herself from rolling her eyes. "You do know this is all part of Shido's cognition, yes? Including the food."

"Still," came Ken's voice. "This is quite the setup. It's like I'm really sitting at some first-class restaurant."

"Shido's cognition is powerful, that's for sure." Morgana hopped into the front of the group, his eyes scanning over everyone. "He knows everything about everyone, but that shouldn't be surprising, given who he is and what he wants to accomplish."

"Keeping his friends close and his enemies closer, I assume?"

The cat-creature nodded his head at Yusuke's comment. Mitsuru brought a hand to her chin. "And he likely keeps them close to make sure they know he's in command. Any little thing they do to tarnish his name, he knows exactly how to get rid of them."

Makoto felt her hands clench at her side. "We have to get that letter from him."

It was the first time Ren had made eye contact with her since they entered the palace. The look in his eyes was a subtle warning that

she was tense and likely showing her frustration. Makoto closed her eyes to take a few breaths, thanking him silently with a weak smile.

“Now,” Mitsuru continued, once again keeping everything moving forward. “We need a few of you to claim the table next to him.”

This time when Ren’s eyes met hers, she knew he was volunteering her to be one of those people. “I’ll go.”

When Ryuji pumped a fist in the air next to her and stepped forward, Makoto cut him off before he could announce his participation. “Would you like to accompany me, Mitsuru?”

It would be nice to have the elder with her, as a sense of familiar comfort and, of course, intelligence. However, Mitsuru chuckled, brushed the hair from her shoulder, and shook her head.

“I believe an adult at the table would keep Ooe from suspecting anything, and he would never approach you.” Mitsuru’s smile made her feel heavy, nervous even. Surely she didn’t think *Ryuji* would be a better partner. Why hadn’t she nominated Ren?! “Children at his esteemed eatery would make him question you instantly.”

“I’m goin’!” Ryuji blustered out long before Makoto could find her voice to ask Ren. “I could eat everything on the menu!”

She heard Futaba’s loud growl of annoyance as Makoto tried to reach out to Ren. “I’m sure you wouldn’t mind being a third wheel, right?”

The grin he wore made her heart smack against her ribs. There was a light dancing in his eyes as his head shook with his laugh. “Asking me to watch my girlfriend share dinner with another man?”

Had it not been for the humor in his tone, Makoto may have panicked and apologized for asking.

But then Mitsuru put a hand on Ren’s shoulders, keeping him from stepping forward. “We will watch on from a distance. The two of you should be more than enough to capture Ooe’s attention.” Then, “We’re counting on you.”

Makoto had accepted the responsibility of the team's advisor on day one, even if the title was self-given. She had helped Ren lead, helped discover weak points of enemies in battle, had proven herself against the shadow figures of her father and her sister…

But something about walking to a table with the expectation of her single-handedly stealing a letter of recommendation from Shido's top henchmen had her sinking into her chair with dread. She knew Ren would intervene if needed. She knew Mitsuru would as well. She knew nothing about this politician, and she had been letting Ren and Mitsuru carry their team all day. She was definitely off her game, and now she was practically *alone.*

"Damn. No beef bowl…"

At least Ryuji could provide conversation to keep her mind from slipping *too* far. Makoto watched him scan over the menu in front of them, occasionally failing to pronounce the impressive selection of foods, then grumbling and leaning back in his chair with a growl.

Makoto couldn't help but chuckle at his demeanor. "I take it you don't speak French?"

His eyes shot up to her, then he huffed like she had insulted him. To add to his humiliation, when the server approached them for their order, Makoto easily listed off her choice, stunning Ryuji into awed silence.

"And for you, sir?"

She had a hard time suppressing her smile when Ryuji attempted to copy her order, failed, then said, "Whatever she had…"

And she did laugh when his head slammed onto the table. "Man, I thought you would have liked beef bowl like your dad!"

Makoto started to feel that weight push her down again. Despite that, she opened her mouth to keep the conversation alive. "Did you know he speaks French?"

Ryuji's back straightened, his eyes wide in disbelief. "F-For real?!"

“Not well, but he’s taught me a few words here and there,” she admitted, crossing her arms and relaxing into her chair. “From my understanding, Mitsuru and my father were very adept at speaking different languages.”

His mouth hung open, but when he looked like he was going to speak, she didn’t hear *his* voice.

“What is this?”

An older man stood off to the side of their table, a scowl on his face. Two men flanked his side, neither of them appearing to be more than lifeless soldiers. However, Makoto knew this was her moment. Everyone was watching her, counting on her to be successful.

She had to do this. For her dad. She would not let Shido continue his tyranny any longer.

Ryuji, however, took the first initiative to answer him. “The hell you want?”

And it was *not* what Makoto wanted to have happen. “E-Excuse us, but you wouldn’t by chance be…O-Ooe-san?”

Thankfully, the older man focused his attention solely on her, seemingly ignoring Ryuji’s rude outburst. “I am. And I demand you leave at once. I prefer to enjoy my meal without nuisances, if you catch my drift.”

She had to think quickly. He was irritable. Ryuji would make more of a scene if she kept to herself too long. So, she came right out with it and hoped for the best. “Would you be willing to write us a letter of introduction to meet with…Shido-san?”

Saying Shido’s name had her biting down the bile that she felt in her throat. She had to fight through this. The minute Ooe began to suspect her of growing disgusted or violent, their cover would be blown.

However, Makoto was quite surprised when Ooe smirked at her with an odd glint to his eyes. “Oh? Why would a minor such as yourself be requesting an audience with Shido-san?”

Because I want him to suffer for all he has done to my family. “The inspiration he instills within us is truly remarkable. Shido-san is working tirelessly to bring about a brighter future for my generation, and those that will follow.” Then, she tried to play to his ego while shifting her attention from Shido and her churning stomach. “Which, of course, would not have been easily done without your help, Ooe-san.”

The man’s smirk twisted into a disgusting grin. His eyes darkened, but not in anger. More like she was striking his egotistical self and enjoyed hearing praise from a young admirer. “You have an impressive way with words for someone so young. You strike me as the kind who would do well in politics.”

He was biting her bait, and now she just had to hope she didn’t pull on her line too quickly. “Oh, thank you, sir,” she added with a nervous laugh. Ryuji sat quiet in his chair, his eyes never leaving her. It was an odd source of comfort. “But I actually wish to support the ideals of such great men like yourself by working for the police.”

Makoto saw no harm in admitting as much, and when Ooe seemed pleased with her response, she released a breath as calmly as she could. “Ah, a superb goal for someone so ambitious. Youngsters who wish to support their country by following Shido-san’s example rather than watch it wilt and wither away will build a bright future.”

Keep pressing him. “That’s very kind of you to say, Ooe-san. That is why I wish to have the chance to meet with Shido-san and express my devotion to his cause personally.”

Makoto hoped that Ooe would pull out a piece of paper and write the letter, or better yet, produce one already made, but he did something she didn’t see coming.

“Such loyalty will get you the greatest honor of all: the power to eliminate anyone standing in your way.”

Ryuji gave off a soft gasp of surprise, but Makoto clenched her mouth shut and let Ooe continue to divulge his secrets. “Shido-san’s efforts to build a world for the upper echelons nearly fell to ruin because of some bastard cop. He refused to let Shido-san’s vision

unfold, but he was easy enough to dispose of. No one will stand in Shido-san's way, in *my* way! He stood against us for the last time!"

Makoto didn't need to hear a name to know who he was referring to. It was even obvious enough that Ryuji jumped to his feet, his fists shaking angrily at his side. "The hell?"

Calm down.

Ooe held his hands up as if defending himself, but he laughed menacingly, confident neither one of them would react with violence. "Ha, the future has never been brighter! We've requested so many mental shutdowns over years, and yet we have never felt more sure of our success until he was *dead!* So keep that in mind, sweetheart, for if you start to lose your path just like he did, Shido will easily eliminate you as well."

Calm. Down.

"I see." Her voice came out so fluidly that it startled her. "It would appear as though Shido-san doesn't view you as an ally, but simply a pawn."

Ooe's laughter was replaced with a growl. "What was that?"

She pushed a lock of hair behind her ear, trying to keep herself composed. If he wanted a fight, she would gladly give him one. But she needed a little more information. "I was under the impression that Shido-san's most valuable associates would grant me a letter, but I must have mistaken you as one of them. We will be on our way."

Ooe grabbed her arm and tugged it hard enough that she lost her balance. "I could write you a letter, but I will refuse! You will never get a letter from any one of our allies, you little bitch!"

Makoto managed to stand her ground, her eyes narrowing through her mask at the man she was *dying* to punch in the face. "It seems like you leave us with no choice but to take it by force."

"You will never defeat me!"

Then, Ooe grabbed his head, just like a shadow would react when her team had trapped them from behind. The darkness consumed him as she felt another pull of her arm, dragging her away from the serpent that represented Ooe's shadow.

"Are you alright?"

Makoto looked over her shoulder, finding Ren and his eyes scanning over her for any signs of discomfort. She may not have been hurt, but she was relieved to be out of danger and back in his arms again. "I'm fine."

He didn't appear to believe her until she caught his lips twisting into his trademark grin. "Dinner with Ryuji didn't look to be enjoyable, so I'll be sure to make it up to you."

It may not have been the time to be making such jokes, but Makoto treasured it and gave him the hug she wanted to give him all afternoon. "I would prefer your company this time."

She felt his chest shake with mild laughter, then they both separated from the other. Ren's eyes landed beyond her, and Makoto steeled herself to enter the fight that had already started. "Well, let's go get that letter, Queen."

Makoto felt like she didn't do much of anything during the battle. Haru's psychic attacks proved most damaging, and Ren was switching his personas around to help her. The rest of the team provided physical support or healing. In fact, this was the first time Makoto had witnessed her father's team fight with their personas.

They were unbelievable. Between Mitsuru, Yukari, and Ken, they likely could have taken care of Ooe on their own. Mitsuru commanded ice and powerful enhancements. Yukari could strike from a distance, occasionally healing when Morgana and Makoto were in the midst of an attack. Ken could use multiple elements, and while his persona struck her as the most odd, one physical attack on Orochi left her beyond impressed.

"Now!"

At Ren's command, the Phantom Thieves did what they did best and ended the battle with an intense all-out strike. Mitsuru's squad stood off to the side, impressed with what they had witnessed. Makoto breathed out an exhale, happy that the battle was over, but knowing that the war was still ongoing.

"We should get moving."

A hand on her shoulder stopped her. Makoto figured it was Ren, eager to tell her that she had done well (she hadn't done much of anything), but was surprised when she turned around and saw Mitsuru behind her.

"I believe that's enough for one day."

Makoto took in the state of her team, and while Ken and Yukari looked to be catching their breath, the others seemed fine. They didn't have time to waste. She was tired of feeling useless. She had enough repressed anger from the way Ooe spoke about her father that she needed to keep *pushing!*

"Makoto."

"We have to keep going."

The pressure on her shoulder increased. "You have done enough."

I have to find Shido!

"We can head back."

Hearing it from Ren was like a slap to the face. Had it been that obvious that she was angry, or that she wasn't filling her role as well as she should have been? She would get better, especially now that Ooe was gone and one letter was in their grasp…

Ren made the decision final when he addressed the group. No one seemed to complain, and it brought with it a wave of déjà vu. He had done something like this before, back in Sae's palace, when Makoto was falling behind and one fight seemed to mentally drain her of energy.

But she had plenty of energy. She just didn't have anyone to take it out on. Her one chance had come and gone, disappearing into nothing…

Makoto cursed herself as they left the palace. Thanks to her, their team would be crunched for time. They had a little over two weeks to gather four more letters and defeat Shido. They couldn't fail. They had to prepare for the palace while keeping up appearances for the public and she had to keep her grades up and make sure her dad was okay…

"It's okay, Makoto."

Ren wrapped his arm around her shoulders, and she fell against him easily. Makoto suddenly felt like she was exhausted, likely from a lack of sleep and not eating as well as she should have been. Plus, her conversation with Ooe had her desperately wanting to see her father again. To make sure he really was alive, and that she hadn't been imagining his presence.

"I will escort her home." Mitsuru came up to them after a few minutes, and Makoto was tempted to tell her that she wanted more time with Ren. Just a few more minutes anyway…

Ren leaned into her head and pressed his lips into her hair. "You did well today. I'll reward you with dinner sometime soon."

She didn't want him to leave her, but after another minute, she knew she was going to have to. Not only did she want to check on her dad, Ren couldn't be out in public for too long. It was hard to break away from him, but his smile and the look in his eyes made her remember he was *alive*, and she would get a chance to be with him soon.

They said their goodbyes, and Makoto watched as Ren lifted the hood of his jacket tighter over his head. He disappeared into the station, leaving her suddenly alone with Mitsuru.

"Let's get you home."

Not wishing to keep the elder any more than she already had,

Makoto nodded her head and began following her. She assumed Mitsuru would have had a car waiting for them, but she was surprised when she was led to a small parking garage a block away from the Diet building. And when she stood in front of Mitsuru's *motorcycle,* Makoto broke out into a smile.

"It's been a while."

Mitsuru returned her gesture, handing her the helmet she had always worn as a child. "I do hope it still fits."

Luckily for her, it did, and Makoto hopped on the bike after Mitsuru. Now that she had Johanna, it felt weird not being the one holding the handlebars, but just as she had felt about relinquishing her advisor position that afternoon, it was nice. It gave her time to find her breath, to focus on what was really important, to come back to center after spinning around nonstop for *weeks.*

The open air as they drove down the streets was welcome as well. Makoto couldn't get this kind of thrill riding her persona through dark and dangerous territory. It had also been a while since she had been inside of Tokyo rather than on a subway underneath the ground. For some odd reason, as her eyes took in the buildings, the pedestrians, the landscape hiding behind masses of steel, Makoto felt her resolve come back to her.

She would stop Shido from turning this city into a drowned wasteland. She would study hard and work harder to keep it from falling into the hands of the next corrupt human who wanted that disgusting vision for himself.

It took them nearly fifteen minutes to reach Makoto's home. She removed herself from the bike, returning the helmet back to Mitsuru, and took a deep breath. "Thank you, for the ride and for carrying my weight in the palace today."

Truth be told, the apology had been weighing heavily on her conscious ever since they had left Shido's palace. It just seemed like the right time to get it off her chest.

Mitsuru, however, looked confused. "Carrying your weight?"

Her head lowered in shame. “I am usually the one who aids Ren when we traverse palaces. Today, you took that responsibility, and I did nothing from the rear. So…t-thank you.”

The older woman lowered the helmet in her hands to the seat Makoto had stepped off of, then offered a weak smile. “When we founded S.E.E.S, I naturally took the lead. It was for my family. I had asked members to join. It was my responsibility. One day, I had led your mother, Yukari, and Junpei through a section of Tartarus that may have been too much for them, but I needed them to be stronger. One fight wore them out, but I wanted to push them until I could see what their limit was.”

Makoto was both impressed and *terrified* of Mitsuru at the moment. “But Akihiko stepped over me and told them they had done enough long before I was willing to call it quits. I was so upset with him that I had a retort on my tongue, but he stopped me. He told me that I didn’t have to keep pushing them, that they had made good progress, and in time, they would be formidable. When I asked him if I had been too harsh a leader and thus, inadequate, he shook his head and only replied with, ‘We all need to step back from time to time. If we stay on the front lines for too long, we forget about the people who are standing behind us.’”

She couldn’t find anything to say before Mitsuru turned to her again. “You may feel like you were inadequate today, but you handled yourself admirably against Ooe. I heard what he had said to you, and instead of acting out in a rage, you kept calm and did exactly what you were meant to do.”

“B-But-,”

She was cut off with a wave of Mitsuru’s hand. “Your father has been a great friend for years. I would never have made it this far in life had he not picked up my slack when I felt as if I was falling behind. We need people to support us in life, Makoto. You will never get anywhere on your own. What I hope you learned today was not that you failed, that you are only important when you act alone or with your own expectation of success, but that we are here to help.”

Makoto felt a surge of guilt. Of course she knew that. She had been

part of a team for months now, and she would never forget what they had been willing to sacrifice to help her with Kaneshiro. They didn't expect her to do anything but help them; *she* was the one who pushed herself too much to make sure she was useful. That had to have been why Mitsuru stopped her from going any further into the palace.

"We have two weeks, and I know that's time we are going to lose quickly, but a war cannot be won overnight," Mitsuru said with a light touch to her shoulder. Makoto suddenly felt like the weight that had been crushing her was now dissipating into thin air.

No. It was still there. She was just strong enough now to hold it. Because she had friends that would carry it for her when she was worn and tired.

"Thank you, Mitsuru." Makoto bowed to her, an action that brought out a soft chuckle from the elder.

Then, Mitsuru nodded to the building behind her. "You get your fighting spirit from your father. So make sure he's not being crushed under his own burdens as well."

Makoto held her hands together over her heart, as to solidify her words before they came out. "I promise."

She watched Mitsuru smile kindly, as if proud of her for sounding so sure of herself. "Given the chaos that has become our normal lives, perhaps slowing down and surrounding him with the reasons he fights would help you grow as well."

Then, she put on her helmet again, nodded once, and drove off, leaving Makoto staring after her. She had no idea what Mitsuru had been talking about. But she did know her dad always needed little reminders that her mom, and her sister, and her, they loved him. It would take some time to see him return to normal, if he ever did, but she would be there with him. She would carry his weight. She would show him that she was more than capable of filling his shoes in the world.

Makoto walked into the building with a new sense of determination.

If she felt weak on some days, she would ask for help. If she felt like she needed a break, emotional or physical, she would let her friends know. What she thought would fill her with shame and anger now made her stand tall. She even waved to the front desk lady, who always smiled at her when she returned from school.

And then she saw it.

The small Christmas tree on the desk. A reminder that December had officially started and it was time to decorate the apartment as a family.

So while she waited for the elevator, Makoto whipped out her phone and found Sae's contact information. Her sister would be busy, she knew that, but it would be the first time in *years* that they could be together as a full family. The thought alone nearly made her burst into tears, but she managed to contain it and send a message to her sister.

She owed it to Sae, to open the door for her to return to the family Makoto knew she loved. She owed it to her mom, who always kept the tradition alive, even if there was a trace of remorse and sadness in her eyes that deepened every year. And she owed it to her dad, who fought for countless years protecting them, who only wanted *one* opportunity to make it up to her sister, and had nearly died before he got that chance.

Will you join us for our annual Christmas decorating Sunday?

Makoto paused before she began rambling on about *why* she wanted Sae there. She waited, and waited, missed the elevator, then slowly turned to take the stairs. Sae was busy, so she didn't know why she was expecting an answer so quickly. Makoto finally told herself that Sae would respond as soon as she was able.

When her hand reached for her keys in her bag, Makoto felt her phone go off. She held her breath, hoping for *once* it wasn't from Ren, and nearly jumped in joy when it was from her sister.

I guess someone should babysit you so you don't break your neck.

Makoto was far too overcome with happiness to even form a response.

After all the hell that had fallen around them, they were going to be a family again.

Chapter 179

Chapter 179

It's the first Sunday in December.

I also didn't think I'd be posting this after feeling like I'm failing at writing, so you all can thank sarcii on Twitter for this update.

(I cannot for the life of me use HTML to add the link to their art but I'll figure it out soon 😓)

I hope this chapter does this story justice

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

It was still hard for him to wrap his head around.

He was *alive*. Minako had summoned a persona she hadn't been able to summon in *years*. And then summon another one to bring him back to life. It was terrifying to think about.

All for what? For him not to be able to arrest Shido for murder, attempted murder, kidnapping, or anyone else who had been a part of the giant mess of unending corruption?

Akihiko turned over carefully in the bed to get more comfortable, as comfortable as he could be anyway. He hadn't been able to sleep after returning home from the hospital since his mind always fired on all cylinders no matter what time it was. He couldn't do anything about Akechi since he didn't have any *physical* proof, and if he tried regardless, he would likely make himself and Sae and Minako look like crazy people in a courtroom. Even with his credentials and the respect he had earned, the public wasn't ready for the truth yet. Which meant he would need more time.

Time that was slowly running out.

It was at least nice to know that Sae and Makoto were taking care of themselves, but he never felt more *useless*. He pulled them into this mess, and they were forced to find their own way out. And they did. Without his help. Because they didn't *need* him anymore.

But when his time had finally come, a hand yanked him back so he could be reminded that he had a *job* to do…

He jerked in his place when he felt an arm wrap around his waist, but Minako quietly laughed into his back. "You really need to go to sleep."

Great. He had woken her up, too. She sounded really tired. "Sorry."

He tried to be calm, to keep her from asking him any questions that would keep her awake, but he knew she could sense his frustrations. Her hand came to rest on his shoulder, her nails gently scraping along the back of his neck. It would have helped immensely, but, it only irritated him even more.

So he sat up in the bed and wiped the sleep from his eyes. "I need to go out for a bit. I don't want to keep you up."

Minako grabbed his shirt and tried tugging him back down to the bed. "Who said I was even sleeping?"

The fatigue in her voice made him sick with regret, but she continued to pull on his shirt until he gave in and fell to the bed beside her. The moment he did, she closed the distance between the two of them, holding him weakly around the middle, and smiling into his chest. "I know this is selfish to say, but I always sleep better when I know you're here."

"You just said you weren't sleeping."

She laughed through her nose as he adjusted his arm so she wasn't cutting off his circulation. "I will now."

He stayed silent, not wanting to annoy her with a conversation that would only aggravate him even more. Her fingers kept moving, over

his stomach, his ribs, until she finally stopped over his heart. She immediately pulled her hand away and buried her face in his shoulder.

“All I see when I close my eyes is you, laying on the ground in that place, *dead*. If I fall asleep, I’m terrified that I’ll wake up and you’ll be gone. So I don’t want to sleep.” A sniff. “I *can’t* sleep.”

He heard her voice crack, felt her tears against his skin, then moved one of his hands to grab one of hers. He said nothing to her as he pressed her palm back against his chest, using more strength than he thought he would to keep her there.

“I’m alive, Minako, because of you. It’s terrifying, yes, but I’m here.”

“I keep saying the next time will be the last. You should have been killed. You were taken from me for good. I don’t want to do this again.”

While she was being quiet, he knew she was hysterical. It hurt seeing her like this because of him. He held on to her as tightly as he could without suffocating her, then chuckled into her hair. “I don’t want to do it again either.”

He counted himself lucky that she thought his joke was humorous enough to laugh at. It could have epically backfired in his face. “I hope we die like this, side by side, cuddled up in bed, because we’re too old.”

He kissed the side of her head. “I could go out like that with no complaints.”

Minako pushed herself up enough so she could plant a chaste kiss to his lips. She then dropped her head to rest against his shoulder. “You’ve always made me the happiest person when I’m upset. I wish I could do the same for you.”

Hearing her soft voice was like a slap to the face. He groaned inwardly while Minako’s hand found its way over his heart again. “I don’t like talking about the things that I don’t have answers to.”

“I know,” she said quietly. “I know you worry over every little thing. I

know this past year has been one of the hardest. But even pushed to the limit, you keep fighting. You'll find your answers one day."

He was pretty sure he would only put everything together right before he was *dead*. A second time. The *last* time. If he was lucky. "I'm tired of hurting you, or the kids, or every single person I know. I'm tired of hearing that voice in the back of my head telling me I'm a *failure*. I can't do my job anymore. I can't protect our children. I can't stop whoever is out for my head, and now there's someone out for yours." He sighed heavily. "I just want one thing to go *right*."

"Aki…" She paused, but in that moment of silence, there was a light *crash* outside of their room. He sat up quickly, forcing Minako to do the same, but he held out his hand to stop her.

"You stay here. I need you to grab Makoto if things go wrong."

He didn't wait to hear her reply as he threw himself off the bed and opened the door as quietly as he could. He heard voices, *two* exactly, muttering over whatever had been broken in the living room. Something felt *off*. It wasn't dark, but it was late enough in the night that it should have been. There was a weak glow coming from the living room. If this was a simple breaking and entering crime, he would love to chat with the culprits. They were *terrible*.

Until he could make sense of the voices.

"You're going to wake them up!"

"Maybe you shouldn't put the lights on the floor!"

"Maybe you shouldn't be so clumsy."

"I'm not!"

Akihiko came into the living room, wanting to ask what the hell was going on, but he couldn't find his voice. So, he instead stood on the edge of the room, staring out at the scene before him.

"Keep your voice down."

Neither one of them had noticed him, having their backs to him, but

he almost jumped out of his skin when Minako came up beside him. “W-What are you two doing?”

That, in turn, made Sae and Makoto jump in their place and quickly turn towards them. Makoto had the typical look of being caught red-handed, but Sae only rolled her eyes.

“Makoto was never any good at keeping surprises secretive.”

Makoto snapped out of her shock and whipped around to face her sister with a scowl. “It’s not my fault!”

“You were always the troublemaker.”

“You keep getting me into trouble!”

“Okay, okay, what’s going on here?” Minako finally pushed her way up to the two of them. “You gave both of us a heart attack.”

Sae turned her head to face the wall and Makoto’s dropped to her chest. “I’m sorry. We were trying to be quiet so we could surprise you when you woke up.”

That was when Akihiko realized what was happening. Sae had a string of Christmas lights in her hand. Makoto stood by a few opened boxes of decorations.

It was the first Sunday in December.

“I thought we were going to be setting up the decorations earlier today,” Minako said, dropping to her knees by one of the boxes. “Why are you both up so early in the morning? And why didn’t you wake us up?”

Makoto fumbled around with her hands before replying. “Because Sis has to work, and she didn’t know if she could make it if we didn’t do it now. You’re both usually up early anyway, so it could have been a surprise...”

“Don’t blame me.”

“But I tripped over one of the strings and knocked over a vase and it

broke. I didn't mean to. I'm really sorry."

Makoto's sorrowful eyes landed on him, as if expecting him to slap handcuffs on her and toss her in prison for breaking something he didn't even know was there. But, try as he might, his voice was still lodged in the back of his throat. There was an odd buzzing in his ears, his body was numb, and his mind had long since shut off as his body relied on muscle memory to *breathe.*

"We didn't mean to alarm you," Sae whispered. He also noted how she wouldn't look at him. It made him even more numb. "But, now that you're both alert and awake, perhaps you would like to help us before Makoto breaks something else."

He thought he heard Minako laugh. But then Sae's eyes met his. He fully expected her to tell him that *he* wasn't allowed to be there. He fully expected her to growl at him, yell at him, to push that figurative sword further into his chest. Still, after all of these years, it was nice to at least see her with her sister and her mother before she asked him to leave.

"Unless, of course, you're too old now to help."

That was when he felt all eyes on him. There was a pressure building in his chest, waiting for that moment for Sae to tell him she was *pissed* and this was her being somewhat kind and telling him to get lost. Even if she didn't *look* angry, or hold his gaze for too long, or even raise her voice at him…

"Dad?"

Akihiko blinked, trying to test his own mind, but he was still standing in the living room with Sae and Makoto and Minako and several boxes of Christmas things and lights and…

The pressure finally caused him to break. "I-I…you want me to *help?"*

Minako and Makoto looked at him with some degree of panic, and maybe he should have just left when he had the chance. But there was some *small* part of him that told himself that Sae would have

made that perfectly clear to him the second she saw him…

“Do you expect us to do all the work and then take the credit for it all?”

It was a fine line he was walking, but at the same time, he could have *sworn* Sae was being sarcastic with him. She always was when she was younger, before she screamed at him and told him she hated him and slammed her door and never called him *Dad* ever again.

So, in his anxious state of mind, he pushed his limits, pretending that she was seven years old and mouthing off to him about how *terrible* his cooking had been that day and how he was lucky no one *died…*

“I guess I should. Heaven forbid you trip your sister and she breaks her neck.”

In that split second, he regretted saying it. This was Sae, the daughter that had hated him for *years*. Just because she had been terrified and a wreck when she had watched him *die* didn’t mean she had forgiven him. She was always worried whenever he was hospitalized. Why would anything *change?*

But he thought he saw a weak smile on Sae’s face, just not directed at him, since she couldn’t keep eye contact with him either. Minako smiled warmly at him. Makoto stomped her foot into the ground and balled her fists up at her side.

“Why is everyone picking on me?”

Minako came to her feet and walked over to where he was still standing and waiting for someone to tell him to get out of the apartment. “You’re not going to be much help standing there, Aki. So why don’t you help Sae put the lights up so Makoto doesn’t have to stand on a chair and break her neck this year.”

Makoto groaned loudly while he watched the smile spread over Sae’s face. The pressure in his chest lightened a small amount as he chuckled at Makoto’s reaction, but he still kept his guard up. Sae

could at any point during this morning start reminding him he was pitiful and she would never forgive him and she would never call him *Dad*…ever…

A strand of lights was rudely shoved into his hands. Akihiko's eyes dropped to them. "Maybe it's too much to ask you to function this early in the morning without caffeine. I'm assuming you still have a coffee maker, yes?"

What was happening? "Um…"

"Good." Sae turned around, but didn't walk off. "You'll need to remind me where everything is."

His eyes found Minako, pleading with her silently to be the one to help, since he knew the second Sae had him alone, she would rip him apart. He wasn't ready for it. Not right now. Maybe later in the day…

Sae slowly made her way into the kitchen and Minako grabbed his wrist and squeezed. "Talk to her."

"…I-I can't. Not right now."

She swiped the lights from his hands. "Aki. She wants to talk to you, too. Go."

Minako nudged him and continued to do so until he was halfway across the room. He decided he probably should do as she had said. At least Sae was being kind enough to respect his feelings and give them their space to talk alone. Minako and Makoto didn't need to hear all of this *again* like he did every year, with or without Sae present.

What caught his attention first, however, was that Sae had her hands on the counter and was leaning up against them. Like she was nervous. Or terrified. Or furious and trying to contain it. He took a steady breath, keeping it in his lungs for a few seconds, and then fully stepped into the kitchen.

"The coffee is in the cupboard by your head."

His voice jolted her, but his eyes fell to the side rather than staying on her. He suddenly needed to *do* something because he was so nervous and had no outlet around. He tried to focus on his breathing and listening to the annoying *tick* of the analog clock hanging above the sink.

“Oh.” Sae moved for the cupboard and pulled out the container of ground beans. “I take it you still prefer black, yes?”

He swallowed the burning question in his heart, but nodded once. She either caught it or took his silence as confirmation. While she continued to work, filling the coffee machine with water and measuring out an incorrect amount of grinds (he almost told her to add another scoop, but didn’t want to offend her, and couldn’t find the nerve to tell her), he leaned up against the wall. He folded his arms across his chest and once again filled his mind with the sounds from the living room and the clock and his own heartbeat.

“I have to get the cups ready, too?”

Her tone alarmed him, but before he could even *move*, she sighed. “I’m sorry.” She opened up a few of the cupboards, looking for the coffee mugs, and he felt that crushing weight on his chest again.

“I’m happy you’re here.” His voice stopped her motions for a second, then she pulled out two cups. “But you can tell me to leave. I’ll understand.”

The cups hit the countertop loudly and he braced himself for the words. “I have so much I want to say to you, but every time I try to put my thoughts into words, I can’t do it.”

His heart hammered in his chest. “You don’t have to say anything.”

The sounds of the brewing coffee filled the silence for a few minutes. Then he noticed Sae’s hands gripping the edge of the countertop. It was hard, *very* hard, to have that small chance of a family tradition with *all* of them rush out the door as quickly as his exhale.

“Sae, it’s okay. I want you to spend this time with your mother and your sister, and I have a bunch of stuff that Mitsuru needs me to

work-,"

"Mom was right. She was right the entire time." He almost asked her about what, but he struggled to voice the question. "She always told me that all of this anger, this hatred I harbored for you, I would regret it if anything ever happened to you."

The air around him suffocated him. He wanted to reach out to her, to tell her it was okay, he deserved it, but he couldn't move.

"I watched Akechi put a bullet through your heart. I watched you fall to the ground. I thought you were dead. You *were* dead. And all I kept saying to myself was that I would never have the chance to tell you I was sorry."

Akihiko continued to stand in shocked silence as Sae released years of her pent-up aggression towards him. "I hated you for putting a wall between us, for never showing up to my tournaments, for breaking your promise to arrest the man who scared me as a teenager. I hated that you avoided me on the job, that you always went through a different prosecutor, or sent one of your men to talk to me instead. I hated that you started to pop up in my life again when everything started to fall apart around me. I hated that you were the one I would cling to before I started to lose my mind. I hated that you could still see me as your *daughter* when I was doing everything I could to keep you away from me."

She took a second to breathe, and as badly as he wanted to stop her, he couldn't. "You cared about me from the day I slammed the door and told you I hated you until now. You took all my hatred in stride and did all you could to show me the error of my ways because you loved me. You did everything you could to protect me, to protect Makoto, even at the cost of your own job, and your own life. But I didn't care. I just wanted to watch you suffer."

"Sae…"

"And then when I finally tell myself you were right all along, you're dead. I would never be able to tell you I was sorry. I was never going to be able to sit down and talk to you about this case, any future cases, or even hear you tell me that you loved me ever again. You

were *gone*. But I thought I could make it up to you if I supported Makoto and helped Mom and then follow the example you set for this city."

He lifted a hand, but he suddenly withdrew it back to his side. He didn't know if she would appreciate the gesture. "Sae, this isn't your fault. I-I should never have hesitated to tell you that I loved you, or that I was proud of you. I was just…I guess, scared that you would push me even further away, or that it would ruin your relationship with your mother and your sister."

Her quiet laughter made him stop. "I always told myself that all I wanted was to hear you say you were proud of me. But then you would, and it wasn't enough. However, that day your friends carried your body out of that world, I told myself that I never deserved your praise, or your love, or even your help."

She took another deep breath, then slowly turned to face him for the first time since she spoke. "By some mysterious power I will never understand, I was given a second chance. So…"

Her eyes fell to the ground. Akihiko was pretty sure he stopped breathing.

"I want you to forgive me."

The moment the words were out in the open, Akihiko found himself wrapping his arms around her shoulders and pulling her into him. He held on to her as tightly as he could, hoping to express his thoughts and feeling through actions because he sure as hell wasn't about to be talking any time soon. He had so much he wanted to say back to her, that he fully deserved her anger and her hatred, and that he was proud of her for the person she had become. She had the strength and the courage to talk to him when he never had the strength or the courage to talk to her all those years ago. At the same time, he was relieved. That tension was gone, replaced with something far too powerful to put into words.

He opened his mouth to tell her *something*, but his throat was burning just as much as his eyes were. He hated being this weak, especially in a moment he *needed* to be strong. He was at least

strong enough to hold her by her shoulders and push her away from him and at least offer her a *smile*.

“I’ve never once held any of this over your head, Sae.” That had been hard as hell to say. “You shouldn’t be the one asking for forgiveness. I should.”

She lifted a hand to wipe her eyes. Even if there were no shed tears, Akihiko could *see* them. But strangely enough, he didn’t feel *bad*. He actually felt much lighter. “Then how about we make a deal? I’ll forgive you if you are willing to forgive me.”

He had *dreams* of this day ever since Sae slammed her door and screamed that she hated him. And now, here it was. That weight that had been growing on his shoulders for *years* was now gone. He could breathe again. He could stand up straight again. He could *smile* again.

He pulled Sae back into his arms. “Of course I’ll forgive you.” He tried to say so much more, but his throat constricted again. “You don’t have any idea how much this means to me.”

She chuckled into his shoulder. “I do, actually. I’ve been struggling with how to talk to you for days, and it feels nice to finally put it all behind me.” Sae was the one who leaned back first this time. “But don’t take this as a right to run off and get yourself killed. I’d like to be able to at least wrap up one case with you.”

It was the first time in a long that Akihiko threw his head back and *laughed*. “It’s not like I *want* to get myself into trouble.”

“Now we know where Makoto gets it from.”

“You don’t tend to make it any easier for her.”

“I don’t mean to interrupt, but Makoto is whining about having to do all the work alone.”

Both Akihiko and Sae turned to Minako, who was leaning up against the wall separating the kitchen and the living room. Makoto was quick to come to her own defense as Sae rolled her eyes and reached for the coffee he had forgotten she had made. She handed

him one of the cups, then walked out into the living room once he had taken it from her hands.

He would have done the same, but he needed a minute. Sae was willing to forgive him. They could all be a family again. They could all be a *happy* family again.

“This feeling you have right now, Aki,” Minako whispered, tears in her eyes, and a smile on her face. “This is why you fight. This is why you’re here. You never gave up on her, and now, she’s come back to us.”

He wrapped his free arm around her back and she leaned against his chest. “I never thought I would live to see this day.” He tilted his head to hide his tears in her hair. “I never thought she would want to forgive me…”

“Mom!”

He felt Minako laugh into his chest, then she pulled away and used a hand to wipe the tears from her face. “This will be the first time in so many years we’ve had everyone here for Christmas.” Her smile showed in her eyes. “Thank you, Aki.”

“Mom!”

Minako rolled her eyes and grabbed the hand he had around her waist. “Come on. We should keep watch before one of them kills the other.”

Akihiko helped Sae with the lights, with direction from Makoto, and a few comical barbs back and forth. Minako handed them more lights, garland, little trinkets to put around the apartment between her pitiful attempts to break up any squabbles. At one random point, Akihiko sat down, exhausted, and Sae poked at him again about being too *old*, to which he told her she didn’t make his coffee as strong as he always made it.

“Sounds like something someone getting old would say.”

And then *he* was the one at the butt of everyone’s jokes.

Once everything was finished (according to Makoto), Minako came to sit on the couch next to him. Makoto dropped into the one next to them to survey their work as Sae returned her empty coffee cup to the kitchen. Akihiko sat there with his arm draped over Minako's shoulders, feeling as light and free as the first time they *ever* put up Christmas decorations. After spending years being weighed down with regrets, he could finally put the past behind him and *move on*. Spending this time with his family, the pure joy he felt knowing Sae was willing to forgive him, gave him hope he hadn't been able to find in years.

Hell, he might even be able to fall asleep without the nightmares.

"I'm sorry to ruin the moment, but, I need to get going."

Minako leaned back enough to allow him to stand up and walk Sae to the door. Even with the emotional morning he had, the fear and regret being lifted off his chest, he still found it hard to talk to her. Sae paused at the door, likely knowing he wanted to say something, then she chose to break the silence herself.

"Can I ask you something?"

She had a solemn look on her face, which made his heart drop into his stomach. "Um. Sure?"

She was quiet, but clearly nervous at the same time. Finally, she closed her eyes and faced away from him. "Would it be acceptable to refer to you as my father again?"

Her words struck him like one of Mitsuru's ice attacks. It even knocked him back on his feet. "W-What?"

"I understand if it's something you wouldn't want…"

He scrambled to find his voice before she left with the impression that it was *not* something he wanted her to call him again. "N-No…I, sorry…" He paused to rub at the back of his head and scream at himself to *speak* before he lost his ability to. "I…I would like that…"

"Very well then," she said several seconds later. Her eyes met his and despite his nervousness, he held her gaze. Her smile made it

that much harder to keep himself composed. “Thank you, Father.”

She was out the door before she could see the smile on his face and the tears that came to his eyes.

I rewrote this chapter a million times and I could write it a million more times and I still don’t know if I would be fully satisfied with it.

But, hopefully someone somewhere felt it was good enough ☺

Chapter 180

Chapter 180

Oh man I am so sorry for disappearing again. A lot has happened since the start of 2023. I went to Japan in February. I got engaged last weekend. I've had to deal with changing work schedules and now a giant inspection coming up. BUT I HAVE NOT FORGOTTEN THIS!

I also start to kinda veer off what people might be expecting from here on out, so I'm a little nervous but I don't care bring on the hate I have a wedding to plan <3

And for everyone who has suffered through my silence, thank you.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

As soon as she stepped into Ebisu Station, Sae released a breath that nearly knocked her over.

When Makoto had asked her to help set up Christmas decorations, Sae hadn't thought anything about it. She had told her sister she couldn't stay long, that she had to at least make an appearance at work that day, but Sae didn't want to upset her. At the very least, she could show up bright and early, do whatever Makoto needed help with, then leave to start her day.

It wasn't until Makoto tripped on a string of lights and their parents bolted into the living room that she realized *exactly* what day it was.

As a child, she couldn't care less about Christmas, the lights, the excitement of her mother and her sister. She wouldn't deny that she liked getting presents (from everyone except her father), but she

was content with just one day, not the entire month of December.

That had changed drastically as Sae got older, consumed with hatred toward her father, her mother for allowing him to remain a part of the family, and her sister for not hating him like she did. Sae would refuse to help decorate when she lived under the same roof, choosing to barricade herself in her room and study for her exams. She refused to open any presents she received from Akihiko, knowing he had likely gotten them for her to “break the ice”. The entire holiday only filled her with immense anger, and as soon as she graduated and left the household, she never wanted to be a part of the foolish tradition ever again.

But now, after getting that heart-to-heart with her father, Sae felt much differently. There was a pressure off her chest and her shoulders that had been weighing on her for days. It had been the first time she had come face to face with him after his *death*. She had been terrified to talk to him, how he would react to any apology she would say, and even what he would say to her. She didn’t expect him to be angry with her; he never had been in the past, but she knew she wouldn’t have had the courage to talk to him first had she not been forced to be there that morning.

They both powered through. It was awkward at first, but she was finally able to come clean to him. She was able to walk away feeling like she was a part of something bigger than herself, a part of her family once again. It gave her a sense of pride she hadn’t had in years. Her father loved her, accepted her and all her shortcomings, and Sae suddenly felt like she could do *anything.*

And so she kept her head high as she started her commute into work.

It would be an interesting day. Sae wasn’t sure what was about to change at work now that her boss was dead. It had been several days now, but no one had been chosen to replace him as of yet. Sae knew that was only a matter of time, and if Shido had the director killed, Sae was positive he would choose one of his crooked henchmen to fill the role.

Had that news reached Akihiko or Mitsuru or anyone on their team?

Was it that big of a deal? Sae worried that while no one would miss the director, someone a hundred times more corrupt was about to take his place. The director had been killed for a reason, to keep something a secret, which meant Shido was already one step ahead of them. Anyone who was to replace him was going to make her life that much more difficult.

It wouldn't matter though. Shido could throw the worst of the worst at her and she would fight back. She had her father now, and he had powerful friends who were willing to help her however they could. Sae could use this chance to showcase her undercover work and gather intel on the bad guys so her team could always stay one step ahead of them. She just couldn't fail or afford to show weakness.

Sae took a moment to take a deep breath before she took her first step into the courthouse. She had to be prepared for anything. She would be walking into enemy territory, alone. While she knew that long before she arrived, it still made that initial step inside that much harder. She had to keep her head up and act like she was their willing pawn, the same person who hated her father and the justice he stood for.

When she broke the barrier and walked into the lobby, nothing out of the ordinary happened. No one waved at her. None of the security guards bothered her. People walked by her without a wave, a nod, a greeting. Everything was normal. Even as she started to head to the stairs and to her office, no one acted *strange.*

That all changed when she reached the prosecution's hall and her secretary called out to her. "Ah, Niijma-san. You have a visitor waiting for you in your office."

Sae knew immediately that something was wrong. She never had unexpected visitors before she showed up to work, and certainly not waiting in *her* office. While she knew that with her boss dead more "important" people would want to meet with her, but this early in the day? Was it about his death, or something else entirely?

Sae said nothing to the woman and made her way to her office like it was just another day. Her mind was racing, but she was also far too curious to take even a second to stop and think. Whoever was

waiting for her wouldn't be friendly, she was sure of that, but she was oddly ready for the challenge.

Strange how one conversation with her father could change her mindset.

She got that challenge as soon as she noticed who was in her office. Two men. One of whom she had never met, and Masayoshi Shido himself.

Shido gave her a pleasant smile and waved his arm, as if allowing her to enter her own space. "Good morning, Niijima-san."

Sae bit her tongue when she was about to question his morning appearance. She did eye him curiously, because it was the proper reaction to having him show up unannounced. The other man, however, narrowed his eyes at her through his dark-rimmed glasses, as if scrutinizing every move she made.

"Well, this certainly is a surprise. I wasn't expecting company first thing in the morning."

Shido's smile remained on his face as he folded his arms across his chest. "You'll have to excuse me. I'm a very busy man, but I wanted to introduce you to your new superior."

The man standing off to the side never flinched. He never stepped forward. He kept his glare on her while frowning deeply. Almost like he was there as Shido's bodyguard to intimidate her.

She wouldn't admit it, but it was working.

"It's time to enforce our laws and end this reign of terror over our country." It was the first time she ever saw a darkness in Shido's eyes. Not that she thought he wasn't incapable, but to actually *see* it…

Sae did her best to not let the pressure building against her chest come out in her tone. "I couldn't agree more."

The darkness in Shido's eyes faded, but she knew the worst had yet to come. "But first and foremost, I must offer my condolences to you

and your family. While Sanada-san stood against me, I would never wish death upon anyone. Had we had more time, I am sure we could have reached an understanding. May this at least bring you comfort."

He bowed deeply to her, which Sae took more as an insult than a sign of peace. An *understanding?* Please. The other man continued to stare her down, as if waiting for her to break down and cry over the memory, accuse Akechi of his crime, or scoff and wave off the soft-spoken words of a criminal mastermind.

Did they *know* she had been there as a witness? Did they *know* Akechi had baited her with sushi just so he could use her as leverage against Akihiko? If she pointed the finger at "the black mask man", would they know she was onto them? If she blamed Akihiko's death on his job, would they know she was lying?

Sae felt she had no choice but to wave it off. It was most likely what they were expecting her to do. "His job was dangerous. He should have retired when he had the chance."

A cold stab to her heart came and went. Thankfully, Akihiko wasn't *dead*, but that memory was still too fresh in her mind to simply be over it. She just had to keep her acting up or they would *know*. There was no way in hell she would let that happen. She owed Akihiko that much at least.

Shido even chuckled at her statement. Sae figured that was a good sign. "I'm sure your sister feels very differently."

That cold stab from a minute ago came back and cut through her soul. Mentioning Akihiko was bound to happen, but her sister? Sae assumed Shido knew everything about her family at this point, but what was the point in bringing up Makoto? To ruffle her feathers? To test her? To *threaten* her?

"Makoto Niijima," said the other man in the room. It was the first time she heard his voice, and she already wanted to throw her hands around his throat at the way he said her sister's name. "Our sources say that she's a part of this terrorist group."

“Now, now Kanaye-san, let’s not jump to conclusions.” Then, Shido’s twisted smile reappeared on his face. “After all, I’m sure your family is dealing with enough trauma right now with the untimely death of your father.”

Breathe.

As of now, Shido wasn’t aware Akihiko was really alive. That was a good sign. However, starting the conversation by bringing up her sister had shaken her up. Especially since they weren’t *wrong* about Makoto being in the Phantom Thieves. She was innocent, as were her friends, but Sae never thought Shido would *know*.

“If you think my sister is a criminal, then you’ve lost your mind.” Sae ignored the way both men looked at her as she crossed the room to her desk. “All she cares about is finishing high school with perfect grades to get into a top tier university. She doesn’t have time for anything else, I can assure you. As for *her* father’s death,” she said with emphasis, even if her tone made her slightly sick herself. “She’s struggling to cope with the loss, but she will be fine.”

However, her supposed new “boss” grinned from his spot behind Shido. “Rumor also has it you are very protective of *your* family. I take it you would alter the truth if it meant protecting your little sister.”

Despite her best wishes, Sae’s hands clenched at her side. “With all due respect, I know my sister. Whoever your “source” is has been selling you false information.”

The eyes of Kanaye never left hers as they narrowed slightly. “The boy Akechi was interrogating after your wasted time with him told him as much. Apparently, Amamiya and your sister were a little more than “friends”. As I’m sure you were aware.”

Sae’s hands balled up at her sides again, choosing to remain silent before she let her anger show in her tone.

“Amamiya said he tried to tell you the same, but you refused to believe him.”

Amamiya had said no such thing, nor had he pointed his finger at *any* of his friends. But Sae also had to remind herself that they were speaking about a boy that was supposed to be *dead.* This was a good sign, too, as they knew she couldn't ask Amamiya to verify the *truth*.

Still… "So you're going to believe Akechi's statement over mine?"

"I would have been more inclined to do so, but you also have several strikes against you from all the incidents surrounding your father's time in custody."

Sae released a dramatic sigh, a hand coming to the side of her head. "I *tried* to keep him behind bars, but he has powerful friends."

The man laughed at her. It was extremely unsettling. "You are a terrible *liar."*

Shido lifted his hand, seemingly annoyed. "Kanaye-san, that's enough. Niijima-san is a respectable part of our team. There's no need for hostilities." He then turned his attention to her. "I do fear that he has a point, Niijima-san. Which is why I have given him the position as the new director."

Sae moved around to grab the back of her chair and nearly threw it at the two men. "As much as I am eager to work with someone so *trusting*, I need more than Akechi's supposed hearsay statement accusing my sister of being a terrorist. Especially given your prime witness is now dead."

"Fair enough," Shido responded, then nodded his head to her new boss. "I'm assuming you have what Niijima-san would be asking for, yes?"

The other man responded quickly. "I'll have it for you by the end of the week, sir."

Sae highly doubted that whatever information they had would be credible, but still. Anything that implicated her sister or her friends would be good enough for a man like Shido. Especially since Akechi had worked with the Phantom Thieves personally. Akechi had also

tried to approach Makoto after school once, and Sae knew from personal experience how dangerous he could be. She didn't think Akechi would *kill* Makoto, nor did she think he actually could, but simply threatening her would provoke Sae, or worse, push Akihiko out of hiding.

However, what physical proof Akechi had that Sae could bring to court and win a case would be impressive if he had it. She doubted that much, which gave her a sense of relief.

Then again, in a justice system where Shido's influence ran deep, it may not have even been necessary. A simple *lie* that Shido approved of would land anyone in prison...

Knowing it was best to keep quiet, she nodded her head and said nothing else. Shido flashed another confident smile, causing Sae to feel another cold poke in her stomach. Their meeting could have been more than just to name her sister as a criminal, but also to gauge her reactions, her words, her tone of voice. Now she was worried her acting hadn't been as good as it needed to be to convince Shido that she wasn't holding back a shocking revelation.

How did Akihiko do this on a daily basis, with multiple threats from multiple enemies breathing down his neck? She could barely handle Shido and his smile and one comment about her sister…

"We will leave you to it then, Niijima-san," Shido said with a slight bow to his head. "Remember, we are on your side. Anything you wish to ask of us, do not hesitate. I promise you that I will lead this country out of this turmoil and into a new age."

A new age of hell, I'm sure.

Sae wisely kept her comment to herself and bowed as Shido walked out of her office. As soon as the door shut behind him, she felt the room close in on her as Kanaye approached her desk. The smile on his face and the darkness swirling in his eyes made it difficult to breathe.

"I would make sure to tell your sister to watch her back. Never let her be alone. Once Akechi's statement is in writing and released to

the public, she'll be arrested." He paused to chuckle under his breath. "I'm sure the criminals in prison right now would love a beautiful piece of meat to pin down and tear apart."

Her body reacted long before her mind could tell her to stop. Sae reached out and grabbed him by the neck with one hand, threw her other arm around the back of his shoulders, and slammed his face into her desk. She could only hope the amount of pressure she was applying was *painful* and that a pen or pencil was cutting into his face…

"Let me tell *you* something," she said quietly, pushing his shoulders down with more force when he tried to stand back up. "Makoto knows how to take care of herself. You so much as lay a hand on her and I'll let *her* tear you to pieces."

He tried again to push himself up, but she refused to allow him the chance. Finally, she heard him laugh, and she felt she had no choice but to let him go. "You really do have your father's temper."

Sae glared at him as he moved his head from side to side to stretch out his neck. She hoped he was in pain come morning. "I'm looking forward to working with you, Kanaye-san."

She thought her sarcasm would have been enough to get him to leave, but it wasn't. "I hope your mother has much of the same bite you do. I'm dying to know if that was one of the reasons Sanada kept her around."

Her stomach started to turn, but she also remembered how that demonic monster had come out of nowhere to defend her mother. She always pictured Akihiko being the intimidating one in their relationship. However, after that night, Sae thought very differently.

That didn't make the threat easier to deal with. "If you have a death wish, then be my guest."

"Enjoy your comfort now, *Sanada-san."* Kanaye grinned once more before he finally made a move to leave. "I'm looking forward to destroying you and what's left of your family."

As soon as the door was closed and she was alone, Sae dropped into her chair and released all the air in her lungs. She took several minutes to catch her breath and calm her heart rate enough to *think*. A new boss couldn't ruin her outlook. He could stress her out or get under her skin, but if Akihiko could handle his bosses for as long as he had, she could handle hers for a few weeks. She *had* to. Especially if he already had Minako and Makoto in his line of sight.

But Shido's time was coming to an end; that she knew for a fact. The Phantom Thieves were doing their thing, whatever that was, and they had a deadline. Shido would have to be taken care of before the election, *two weeks,* and *she* had to have her case strong and presentable by then.

However, she was shaking. Sae had gotten used to the fingers being pointed in her face, the threats on her own life, but it was something else entirely to hear them directed at her family. It had been a luxury that she didn't realize she took for granted until now. She could easily understand why Akihiko did all he could to keep their relationship a secret. She didn't have to worry about Makoto, or her mother, or anyone but herself really.

And while she knew Makoto and her mother could take care of themselves, they couldn't be on guard every second of every day. Their friends couldn't protect them every second of every day. One wrong move was all it would take….

She would not lose another member of her family again because she was *weak.*

That motivation caused her to reach into her bag and pull out the phone Mitsuru had given her weeks ago. Sae hadn't had much of a reason to use it until lately, and she felt safe communicating with Mitsuru about what had just happened. She may have been overreacting, but she would rather be too cautious than not cautious enough.

Please keep my sister and my mother safe.

It was a pathetic request, but a reply caused her phone to *buzz* a second later. *You have my word.*

Sae felt a weight lifted off of her shoulders at Mitsuru's words. She never could have felt this way working with Shido or his men. If Akihiko hadn't been a constant in her life that year, she was sure the pressure would have killed her by now.

He really had been a great father.

She shook her head. She had a chance to atone for all she had done wrong, which meant she would have to carry her own weight. Their case against Shido was weak at best, and there was very little time to gather everything she would need to get a judge to sign a warrant.

It was time to sit down with Akihiko and Mitsuru and put all their cards on the table. There wasn't a lot she could offer them, but Sae also knew she had something they didn't.

The truth from Akechi's mother's best friend.

I'd like to meet with you to discuss our evidence against Shido.

Sae didn't have to wait long for another response. *Of course. As soon as you are finished with your day, I can meet you at your apartment.*

She was quick to type out, *I'd like Akihiko to be there as well.*

Sae felt like a child when she deleted her message, typed it back out the same way, reworded it to replace *Akihiko* with *Father*, then sent her original message. She figured Mitsuru wouldn't mind or comment about why she couldn't refer to Akihiko as her father yet.

Then she realized what she was asking. Akihiko couldn't be out and about. While everyone thought he was dead, that didn't mean one person wouldn't notice him out on the streets and blow his cover. Plus, she'd rather have him at home with her mother and Makoto.

Your mother and your sister are going into Shido's palace this afternoon. We can go over everything while they are out. It would be easier to have the conversation at their place so as not to attract attention to Akihiko.

Suddenly, her day was looking up again. All she had to do was have patience and endure whatever Shido had planned for her. He wouldn't win, not with all the people she had on her side. It wouldn't be easy, or quick, but Sae knew it would be worth it to catch the bastard after years of slipping through the cracks.

This is technically part 1 of 2. Just in case you thought it was a weird way to end the chapter.

Thank you again for reading!